

Written by
**KAORU
SHINOZAKI**
Illustrated by
KWKM



FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



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I stopped her from speaking
with a gesture and walked
over to her. We were close
now—almost touching.
I brought my mouth
to her ear.

“EH?
E-EXCUSE
ME-?!”

|| SERAS ASHRAIN ||

|| MIMORI TOUKA ||





EVE SPEED

“PUT
YOUR BACK
INTO
IT!”

“Sir Too-ka, never
take your eyes off
your opponent.”



“COMMENCE
ANNIHILATION.”

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WRITTEN BY
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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 5

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Illustrations by KWKM

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Prologue

IN THE NORTHWESTERN reaches of the Kingdom of Magnar, the fortress city of Argyle was the bastion of the western front after the fall of the Nightwall.

Now it was gone—the first to fall victim to the Demon Kingdom’s western advance.

Reduced to flaming ruins, billowing black smoke rose into the air along with all of the human forces’ initial momentum and will to fight. Unable to escape in time, the citizens of Argyle had been brutally annihilated by the monsters.

“Grgheaaaah!”

“Hya-gya gya gya! ♪”

The enemy had moved faster than anyone had predicted they could and the evacuation of the city faced delay after delay. Many were left behind, and over half the Argyle defense forces were killed in battle.

A watch tower on the city walls loomed above the gruesome spectacle—on its roof stood a single ogre, looking down on the carnage. Watching the dust blowing from the conquered city, he clutched the chief of the defense force’s severed head by the hair, and it swung at his side. His eyes narrowed in frustration.

Some of my prey have escaped. Let me play with you. More. More.

The ogre let those thoughts flow through him, then released them in a fearsome battlecry.

“Ksheaaa!”

FORMER CHIEF RIDER OF THE WHITE WOLF RIDERS

“CONTINUE THE EVACUATION of all citizens from Argyle!
Abandon the city! Soldiers, fall back to Shishibapa in the South for

now!”

The sound of hooves on the sand below crunched like freshly trodden snow as they rode. The old knight, Malg Knogg, turned on his horse to look back at the black smoke rising from the fortress city.

“Tch...those blasted filthy ogres!”

Known for their reckless disregard for their own lives in battle, the main fighting force had been ogre soldiers in numbers that seemed impossible.

I knew there were many of them, but I never expected...

“Sir Malg!” The vice-captain of the defense forces drew his horse level with Malg’s.

“Oh?! You’re still with us, eh?! Good work on the rear guard!” shouted Malg.

“Not at all, it’s every soldier’s wish to give their life to protect others!” the vice-captain replied.

“What of Orvis?!”

Upon hearing the captain’s name, a bitter expression formed on the man’s face. “I know not. I haven’t found him among our number.”

“If only we weren’t so weakened by the Demon King Essence!” Malg ground his teeth.

The attackers all gave it off—a pure evil aura derived from the ruler of the Demon Empire himself. Wherever the essence spread, humans were drained by it. Their movements became slower and it took much more effort for them to manipulate mana. The effect of the essence could swing the tide of victory on the battlefield.

“But the White Wolf Riders...” said the vice-captain desperately. “Sir Sogude, the one and only divine sword wielder on the continent... They can’t possibly be defeated, can they?! Say it isn’t so, Sir Malg!”

“I’d like to think not, but not even Sogude can escape the essence’s power. If we could only defeat the Demon King, there might be a way. That’s why we need those unaffected heroes from another world to defeat him for us!”

Then we can wipe out the remaining golden-eyes with our own forces...

Each monster emitted the essence at different rates. Intel

suggested the stronger a monster was, the thicker the fog of essence it gave off.

The amount the Demon King himself gives off must be unimaginable. Rumor has it not even the Goddess of Alion herself can withstand it. Could even Civit Gartland, the 'Strongest Man in the World' have defeated him? The ones who killed him, those cursed-magic users Ashint... If they were added to our ranks, we might be powerful enough to face him. No, we'll have to rely on the heroes from another world after all.

"Eh?"

A trail of sand rising along the road ahead—something was coming toward them. Malg ordered the group to slow, and prepare for battle.

"It looks to be a wagon," said the vice-captain, before narrowing his eyes further.

"What?!" Malg's expression hardened, and he frantically began giving orders. "It's ghoulish horses! Archers, forward! Fire at will!"

The ghoulish horses galloped toward them at tremendous speed, pulling the speeding wagon behind them.

"I can't see any soldiers riding in the wagon yet." Malg stared forward, carefully studying them with his sharp eyes. "But the load they're pulling is huge. It shouldn't be so stable without any weight."

The road wasn't in the best condition and there was something strange about the way the wagon was able to speed toward them.

"This might be some kind of trap. Stay on guard," said Malg, trying to sense the enemy's plan.

"Yes sir! Anti-vehicle squad, move up! Anti-cavalry, prepare for battle!"

Suddenly, the ghoulish horses fell to the archer's fire. Nobody moved a muscle as the wagon flipped, spilling its contents in all directions.

"I-it can't be—"

"Th-those are... The citizens of Argyle who evacuated ahead of us...?"

There were too many corpses to count.

"Th-they out flanked us!"

“When?!” Malg stepped back as if he’d been struck, staring out in shock at the other wagons now charging toward them.

“Don’t tell me all of those are—”

Another ghoulish horse took an arrow right between the eyes, crashing into the ground and sending a cloud of sand up behind it. Its wagon overturned as well.

“Gah?!”

Corpses—a mountain of them.

Several were wearing the armor of the Argyle defense force.

“Sir Malg, o-over there...”

Malg looked past the ghoulish horses to see a curtain of sand rising in the distance, shadows rumbling beneath it. They drew ever closer.

Those aren’t reinforcements from Shishibapa, those are...

“...enemies.”

Lines of ogre soldiers mounted on ghoulish horses were charging toward them.

“There’s something impaled on their spears!” the vice-captain cried.

Malg felt the blood drain from his face. The ogres held their spears aloft, human heads skewered on each and every one. The soldiers at the front of their lines gave a fierce battle cry.

“Ksheaaa! Ksheaaa!” It was a chorus of glee and murderous intent all rolled into one. The vice-captain gripped the reins of his horse tightly.

“Wh-what... H-how dare they?!”

Just then, Malg heard the sound of wingbeats in the air.

“A shadow...?” A sense of dread crept over him. He looked up at the sky reflexively just before the ground shook with a massive thud. “Impossible... A golden-eyed monster that can fly?!”

Yonato’s “Holy Eye” shot down anything in the sky...or at least it should have. As such, the Demon Empire only invaded on land.

This creature shouldn’t even exist!

“Listen, human,” the six-meter-tall monster spoke. “My name is

Dreykuvah—loyal servant to the Demon King Empire and Third of the Sworn.”

The creature had the golden-eyed head of a goat and fur like purple flames. It walked on two legs, its intimidating bluish-purple wings spread out to their full length.

The ogre soldiers were completely forgotten—everyone was transfixed by the fierce new threat that had appeared behind them. Malg’s body felt heavy.

The essence... I never knew it could be so strong that I would be unable to move under its influence. The Demon Empire...just how strong are they?!

The black goat demon held its huge clawed arms aloft, stirring the stagnant air.

“Humans. Do not be so quick to give up on living. Steel your wills and grasp at life with your own two hands. Do not fear. If you do, then we will trample you...without mercy!”

The White Wolf King was handed reports of the fall of Argyle, then of Shishibapa in quick succession. The survivors were few—enough to fit on a single wagon. Three days had passed since the latter had fallen, and the battles had been massacres in the truest sense of the word.

Finished with their preparations for battle, the heroes from another world departed the capital of Alion led by the Goddess herself. They were bound for Magar—the land that was to stage the first great battle of this war.

Chapter 1: The Forbidden Witch

ERIKA THE FORBIDDEN WITCH is what the dark elf called herself.

We've finally found her—face to face.

I looked to Lis, Seras, and Eve—they all looked relieved.

It seemed impossible, but we've finally arrived at the inner depths of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. We're all tired—both physically and mentally. I can understand them letting their guard down a little, but we aren't at the finish line yet.

This is just the midway point. Will the witch help us? We need to find that out before we can relax. Everything depends on what we say next.

Erika placed a hand on her hip, which was twisted smartly in our direction. Her long black hair swayed with each motion of her body.

“So...that racket outside was your doing?” She yawned lazily in our direction. “You woke me, you know?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that was the work of my mercenary band.”

I emphasized *my* to make it clear who represented our group.

“*Yours*, huh?” The witch’s eyes fixed on me, narrowing as they did. “Such a ruckus... You stumbled across a mouth-lure, I suppose?”

She must mean the alarm monster that Eve killed in the woods...

“Unfortunately, we don’t know as much about this land as you do. We’ve been finding our way through trial and error. We had no idea what that mouth-lure would do.”

“Making excuses now, are you?” The witch raised her eyebrows. “But there’s no despair in your voice—must mean you haven’t lost anybody along the way.”

“Yeah, we’re all here in one piece.”

“Impressive. Don’t move any closer.”

I stopped sliding my feet closer to her. “Couldn’t see your beautiful face is all.”

“Ridiculous. Flattery will get you nowhere.”

I don't know how much she understands about my skills, but she's already seen right through my maximum range. Not like I have any intention of using them...at least for now. I wanted to at least get into Paralyze range just in case. But that might've been a little careless.

She didn't respond much to my compliment either—

"I haven't checked the barrier outside yet, but...it seems awfully quiet. That wave of monsters has already receded. There was quite a number of them—humanoid types, too. How did you get away from them?"

"It's quieter because I killed most of them. The rest ran away, I guess."

"Excuse me? You killed them? The humanoid types, too?"

"Yeah, the humanoid types too."

"Was it that same strange magic power you used to tie up my special golems?"

"It wasn't regular magic. It's the power of a hero from another world."

Erika looked somewhat surprised at that, but her expression quickly changed to one of satisfaction. "Hero from another world, I see. That puts things in perspective. Your type tends to have strange abilities."

I don't mind revealing to her that I'm a hero from another world. She's smart—was likely going to realize it on her own sooner or later. It's a good chance to earn trust.

I exchanged looks with Seras to see if she understood what I was doing.

All right, good. She knows when the witch is telling the truth—and when she's lying. She can find out what kind of things the witch is willing to lie about—even just the small stuff. That can help us understand more about what kind of person she is.

"I see how you managed to make it this far. Now then..."

The witch pounded the floor with her staff. Her eyes were cold, like purple crystals seeking the truth—somehow icy yet fierce and burning at the same time. "Tell me why you are in my house."

"Mind if I ask something first?"

She studied me in silence for a moment before answering. “Well, I suppose it’s unfair if I ask all the questions, isn’t it? Ask away.”

She’s pretty willing to listen, at least.

“You heard I’m a hero from another world, but you aren’t cautious of me. Why is that? How do you know we weren’t sent by that Goddess on some evil mission?”

The witch swept the hair from the nape of her neck in a grand motion.

“Not all the heroes follow the Goddess’ orders, don’t you know?” Erika began twirling her fingers in her hair as she spoke. “The summoned are complicated and some end up outcasts. I imagine most that don’t follow her will end up rotting away in the Ruins of Disposal. Looks like she didn’t subject you to that—you should be thankful.”

She knows about the Ruins of Disposal.

“Or are you telling the truth about being her catspaw?” The tip of her staff began to glow, and a small ring of symbols appeared at its head. “Did that evil Goddess send you here?”

Magic, eh? I should just be honest with her. I’m trying to find out what she really thinks. It might be dangerous to water down my own opinions. The more time I spend probing her, the more suspicious she’ll become of me.

“Quite the opposite,” I said. “I’m out for revenge against the Goddess of Alion.” I heard Eve and Lis gasp behind me. I hadn’t told them yet that I intended to go up against the Goddess. “Which side are you on?”

Here it is. The witch’s response here will determine everything. If the witch does happen to be on the Goddess’ side, she’ll leave us no choice but to defeat her and take over this place.

I waited for her reply, and for Seras to tell me whether it was true or false.

“Huh?” The witch scrunched up her nose tightly and put her hands on her hips, her displeasure on full display. “The Goddess of Alion not only viewed me with suspicion from the start, but she’s also the one who saddled me with this blasted *forbidden* title! She’s a false god! Evil, you know? What reason could I possibly have for liking that foul Goddess...? Hey! Wh-what are you laughing at?”

“Sorry about that,” I apologized. *Sounds like Erika has got some*

particular feelings of her own toward the Goddess... I never expected she would straight-up call her foul.

There was no sign from Seras that she was lying, either. That was one less thing to worry about.

"Then I'll return to my questions if you're quite done? Why have you come to see me?"

"I have two requests."

"Two? How greedy of you."

"I am human, after all."

"Fine. Go ahead. I'll listen, at the very least."

"First, this leopardman and dark elf behind me. I'd like you to give them your protection."

"...Go on." Erika raised her staff a little into the air.

"They're being pursued, you see. Unless you agree to shelter them, all that awaits them are hopeless days on the road as runaways."

"Hmm... that means I don't have to shelter you and that high elf then?"

"If possible we'd like to stay here for a short time. In return, we all promise not to leak information about you to the outside world. You'll have to take our word for it, but there'd be nothing in it for us. And we'll leave as soon as my second request has been granted."

Eve and Lis looked troubled by the part about me and Seras leaving as soon as possible. The witch leaned forward, holding onto her staff for balance.

"Confident in your skills as a negotiator, I see."

"It's why I do the bargaining."

"And you aren't all talk, hmm. Hmph, I can't say I have a bad first impression of you. Not bad at all, you know?"

"I'm trying to be considerate. You might become our guardian, after all."

"Ridiculous."

Seems to be a verbal tic of hers. The word's supposed to mean she finds something laughable, isn't it? But she's not even smiling.

No mocking laughter, no smirking, no sarcastic grins, no self-deprecating smiles—nothing.

“So, what is your second request?” asked the stony-faced witch.

I took out the three scrolls from my backpack. “These.”

“What are they? Maps?”

“Incantations.”

“You came all the way out here just so you could learn how to read those little scrolls? What’s so special about them?”

“Forbidden magic.”

“...Eh?” The witch’s expression changed.

“I’m searching for someone who can read these. I thought maybe a *forbidden* witch might be able to help me out.”

“You have all three. That would mean...” The witch looked to have realized something. “Wait, you said you want to take down the Goddess of Alion?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Her shoulders sank. “Can’t be done.”

The way she said that... It’s not that she doesn’t know how, but I get the impression that she’s not willing to tell me. Still no sign from Seras, but it looks like she’s trying to decide if she’s telling the truth or not.

Did Erika mean she’s literally unable to teach me, or just that emotionally she can’t find it in herself to do it? She mentioned that I have all three of the scrolls didn’t she? She definitely knows something about these things.

“You know about forbidden magic, don’t you.”

“...Correct. Well—” The witch continued to lean forward on her staff, lightly flitting her bluish-purple eyes around the cavernous room. “I have no intention of just handing over the knowledge to someone I do not yet know is worthy.”

“How can I convince you?”

“Who knows?”

“Okay, I see.”

“Do you, though?” She scrunched up her nose.

No luck getting any further on the path to the forbidden magic yet—let's take a different route, then.

“We can come back to that. First, I'd like to discuss your sheltering the leopardman and dark elf.”

“Why should I take them in anyway? What do I get out of this?” She turned to Eve and Lis. “You there...leopardman. Are you of the Speed clan?”

“I am, yes.” Eve took a step forward. “The daughter of Eidimm—my name is Eve Speed.”

I was the main negotiator, but had told the others to freely step up when they had something to say. The witch seemed to have expected that answer.

“Edimm. And what of Pakih?”

Eve paused a moment before answering. “Dead. My father and mother both.”

“I'm sorry for asking. I didn't know.”

“There's no need to apologize. What's done is done.” Eve raised her arm to show the witch. “They gave me this map—the one you granted to my clan. This is how we made it here. ‘If you ever need the Forbidden Witch's help, use this map to find her.’ ...Or so my father told me before he died.”

“I am indebted to the Speed clan. But...Edimm and Pakih are dead, then.” A shadow fell across Erika's face.

She used to be friendly with Eve's parents. You can tell just by looking at her.

“So you're the daughter I met back then. You're Eve.”

“Hmm? We have met before?”

“You must not remember. Well, you were still just a baby when I came to see you.”

“...I see.”

“I've actually stopped receiving reports of the Speed clan of late.”

“My clan was destroyed by an ambush. I was the only survivor.”

“An ambush by *who*?” The witch's tone flipped in an instant—it was heavy and serious now, burning with purple fire. Eve, on the other

hand, sounded more defeated than anything else.

“They were just children, the ones who attacked us—barely of age. I remember that much, but...”

“Tell me their *names*.”

That sounded almost like an order.

“I don’t know what they were called. I remember clearly their strength though. Power well beyond their years.” Eve sighed wearily. “Knowing only that, I can hardly set out to take revenge upon them. The children are likely now grown, with completely different features than I would remember.”

The witch clicked her tongue.

She seems more emotional than I first thought—angry on behalf of the people she cares about.

“For a time after the ambush, I wandered the continent, lost and alone. Then I met Lis, wandering by herself just like I was.” Eve placed a hand on Lis’ small shoulder. “We started traveling together, searching for a safe place to live. When we were targeted by a band of slave traders one day, we had no other choice but to escape into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.”

Eve shook her head, looking helpless.

“The monsters here were far more fearsome than the slave traders. We were forced to turn back, and were eventually captured by the slavers.”

Eve went on to explain the story in full—her sale to the slave market in Monroy, her life as a bloodsport warrior, and the desperate way she fought to buy back their freedom. She went on to explain the baron’s betrayal, and the way Seras and I rescued them both from the city. The witch listened in silence. When it was over, she looked at Lis.

“And you, what is your full name?”

“I-I’m sorry... The only name I know is Lisbeth,” stammered Lis.

“So your parents...?” But the witch stopped herself from saying any more.

Lis told her story in fits and starts. “I... Before I met Big Sister, I lived in the forest, in a village with other dark elves. I was an orphan, so I don’t know who my real parents were, and I don’t remember.

Lisbeth was the name the people who took me in gave me. The name of their daughter who passed, I later found out.”

Terror crept across Lis’ face as she continued to speak.

“One day, the village... It was destroyed by knights who said they were from Alion. I never understood why they came.”

Alion. The country of that foul Goddess. The more I learn about it, the less I like the place.

“So you somehow survived the attack, and set about wandering on your own, then chanced to meet Eve?” the witch asked, a look of irritation still lingering on her face.

“Yes. And...” Lis looked over at me. “Mr. Too-ka saved me when I was in danger, just like Big Sister told you.”

Erika couldn’t hold in her annoyance any longer.

“I won’t lump all you humans into the same vile bunch, but I cannot help but raise an eyebrow at your views and treatment of the elves and the other demi-human races. Foolish as always, even after all these years. Another fine reason I separated myself from that world of yours. Nevertheless, to the matter at hand.”

The witch’s head dropped.

“I would usually have driven you away...but Edimm’s daughter, and a dark elf orphan girl who has lost her home. I give in.” She lightly shook her head, and began to question herself. “No, no, no. Why should I? How much of that was true, anyway? But only one of the Speed clan would know of Edimm, and I do see the resemblance...”

If it came to it, I could easily get into range to use my skills to start a fight. But best to stick with the plan for now. A leopardman with a connection to the witch and a dark elf with an unfortunate past—just like her. Those two elements are giving her pause. It probably wouldn’t have gone this well if it were just Seras and me. We’d just be sent away on the spot.

This Forbidden Witch—Erika—can be sympathetic, but mostly she seems to be a realist. I get the feeling it takes a lot to draw that sympathy out of her, but Eve and Lis managed to do it brilliantly.

The witch straightened her back, appearing as if she’d come to a decision.

“All right, then, I will allow you some room for compromise.” A

flash of doubt appeared in her eyes. “But allow me to say one more thing, okay? No, in fact I’m going to say it whether you allow me to or not. Eve, Lis... *Mister Too-ka* may well be using you in his plot to get closer to me, you understand?”

She’s thinking that far ahead—she’s smart, as expected.

“I don’t care,” said Eve firmly, “and even if that’s true, I don’t mind being used by Too-ka. This man has done enough for me not to care about that. He put his own life in danger to bring us here. You could say I used him too, in some ways.”

“I-I don’t either!” said Lis. “M-Mr. Too-ka can use me any way he likes! I-I don’t know if I can be of any use to him though...”

“How long has it been since you two met this man?” asked Erika, narrowing her eyes.

Eve answered honestly.

“Hmph. Quite a strong bond of trust you have after such a short time together. This Too-ka must be quite the gentleman—or a considerably skilled con artist.”

I snorted at that. “Hmm... Little bit of both, I guess.”

“Ridiculous.” The witch pounded her staff against the floor once again. “You’re crafty, but I don’t mind that.”

She turned on her heel.

“Didn’t break any of my golems either, did you? I suppose that was a calculated decision as well. All done to earn my trust...” Erika looked back at me over her shoulder. “But I find you to be quite interesting, Too-ka. I suppose we can socialize for a little while, at least. I’ve gotten a bit bored lately.”

She spun her staff around with a single hand.

“Very well. Welcome to Erika’s house.”

All right—that’s one request granted. Not a bad start.

Well, I suppose she did see through my plans, but agreed to let us stay anyway. In any case, that’s over and done with. Now if I can just earn her trust, I’ll have cleared all my objectives in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters and be one step closer to the magic that foul Goddess has forbidden anyone to use.

I covered my mouth with my hand to hide my smirk as Erika’s

words echoed in my mind.

“You want to take down the Goddess of Alion?”

I’m not sure if she realized it herself, but the witch has already given me an important bit of information about that forbidden magic.

Now I knew for sure that the forbidden magic could take down the foul Goddess.

A door opened at the top of a long wooden staircase to reveal Erika standing on the other side.

“Come in.”

Eve took Lis by the hand and glanced over at me for permission. I nodded back, and the two of them began to walk toward it, followed by Sleii.

“Let’s go, Seras.”

“Yes,” she replied, running a little to catch up to me as I strode toward the others.

“It appears we’ve gained her trust, doesn’t it,” said Seras, lowering her voice.

“Yeah. We’ve got a place where Eve and Lis can be safe. Things are going great for the time being.”

Up the stairs and through the door, we came into a wide room lit by candlesticks. A thought occurred to me that they might be using mana as fuel.

In the center of the room was a low wooden table. Most of the furniture was made of wood and it all looked stylish, like antiques from somewhere in Northern Europe. Erika leaned her staff up against a side table and sank down deep into her sofa.

“Wait a minute.”

As we waited, a golem appeared from the corner of the room, carrying four chairs in its arms. It quickly placed them evenly apart around the table.

“Well, sit then?” she asked expectantly.

We sat as requested, and Erika took a silver cup from a table next to the sofa. “Want something to drink?”

Seras looked over at me questioningly.

“Sure,” I replied.

Seras must be worried she'll spike our drinks with some sleeping drug, but it's better to present ourselves as trusting Erika for now. If anything does seem out of the ordinary, I'll be ready to handle it.

The golem brought us four silver cups on a tray.

This thing's a waiter too? Handy.

I took a cup, which appeared to be filled with tea. I carefully brought it up for a sniff.

Smells like the stuff they served in Monroy... Must be the same herb.

I brought the cup to my mouth as if to drink some, but only stuck out the tip of my tongue to touch the water. Erika shouldn't be able to see my mouth at this angle, so she wouldn't know if I was testing it for poison. It didn't taste off, so it was probably fine.

“Worried it might be poisoned? But well, I suppose you're right to be cautious.” Erika held out one hand toward us, the other running through her long, sleek black hair with a comb. She was looking straight at Seras. “I won't be offended. Go on then...take your time testing it.”

“Ah! I didn't mean to!” Seras shrunk into her chair, holding her cup in both hands.

Must've been noticed checking her drink, too.

Eve and Lis were both drinking from their cups already. Erika now had one hand rested on her cheek, looking at Seras with a piercing stare.

“You're Seras Ashrain, aren't you?”

“Y-you know me?” responded Seras.

From what I know, Erika has been living away from society for at least ten years. Ten years ago Seras was only nine years old. Even if she did know Seras back then, how would she be able to recognize her now she's all grown up? No, that can't be it. From the way she just spoke, it doesn't sound like she's isolated out here.

“Do you have a way of getting information from the outside?”

“I do,” she replied, elegantly bringing her legs together and

looking over at Slei for some reason. “It’s an ancient power, long lost to the ages, but...”

“Do you have familiars or something?” I asked.

Erika raised an eyebrow at that. “I’m surprised you know of them.”

“Just a guess, y’know.” I just had a picture in my head of witches using familiars from all the old stories I’d read. All it took was her looking at Slei for the puzzle pieces to fall into place.

Erika snapped her fingers.

“It is as you say. I learn about the outside world through my familiars. I don’t wish to involve myself with it, but there are so many interesting things out there. So, I get regular updates. Incidentally...” Her gaze fell down to my robes. “Is that monster in your robes a familiar of yours?”

She noticed, then. I thought she might.

“I don’t know if I could call it a familiar. My *partner*, maybe. A slime.”

“You don’t know the definition or practical use of the term, I take it?”

She’s trying to figure out more about me wherever she can. Quite the crafty witch, isn’t she?

She continued, “Well, I’ll do you the courtesy of instructing you. Familiars are monsters and animals bound by a magical contract. They can be given orders of a kind, and can send back pictures of the things they see. I can even talk with people through familiars, but it takes such a toll on both the creature and me that I’m sure it’s taking years off my life.” Erika stretched her neck, and massaged her own shoulders. “So I don’t use my powers to talk if possible. The whole process makes me so tired I could sleep for days after doing it just once.”

I guess Piggymaru isn’t technically a familiar then.

“I don’t have a magical contract with it—it’s more like a valued member of the team.”

I heard a happy, “*squeee*” from inside my robes.

“Hmm... So what of that horse with the transmission crystal on its back?”

Transmission crystal, eh? Well, I'd meant to ask about Sleï, so this seems like a good time.

"Do you know anything about her? We found her as an egg in the Mils Ruins, and she hatched here in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters."

"I can't tell if she's a divine beast or a magical beast. Not even I know this kind of monster. Hey, do you mind if I examine her later?"

"So long as Sleï doesn't mind, and it isn't dangerous."

Erika seemed happy to hear that. Straightening her back and sitting up on the sofa, she seemed to be in a better mood, but she still wasn't smiling.

"Thanks." Her gaze shifted to Lis, who was struggling to stifle a yawn. "Hmm? Ah, sorry, my bad. You just came through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, didn't you! Even if it did happen to be from the south, you must be exhausted."

Lis looked uncomfortable with the sudden attention. "Ah... You were talking about something so important and... I'm sor—"

"You don't need to apologize, Lis," I interrupted. "You were trying to be polite, weren't you? There's nothing rude about that. And, well, you need to work on that habit of apologizing for everything."

"He's right, you poor thing. No need to be so sensitive to other people's feelings all the time." Erika nodded, leaning back on the sofa once more. Then she pushed herself up from the sofa with both hands. "Her self-esteem and confidence have taken a beating too... Just thinking about how she must've been treated to become that way makes my blood boil."

"That's why I've asked you to let her stay here and relax. Heal in her own time," I said.

Erika stayed in her half-sitting posture, squinting at me. "Whenever you open your mouth, I feel like I'm being strung along."

"Probably just your imagination."

"Might if I ask how old you are?" Erika frowned at me when I told her, still frozen in place. "That's a joke, right?"

"How old are you, anyway?" I asked in return.

"I've lived through several of your human lifetimes."

“Then should I be more respectful?”

“Ridiculous. Enough with your jokes. Listen here, Too-ka. Just because a person has lived a long time doesn’t make them worthy of respect.”

“I’m glad to learn something new about the way you think. Now then, am I to understand you’re willing to give us a place to sleep?”

“Yes, you could all do with some rest.” Finally standing up, Erika called over her golem and gave it some orders. “Ah, but I can’t give you all private rooms, you know? I only have one room for guests. The other is an old bedroom of mine you’ll have to clean up before you can sleep in it.”

“That’s fine,” I replied.

“Oh, and only one bed in each of the rooms, so you can double up or one person can take the floor. Up to you.”

Eve and Lis will sleep together. Meaning...

I looked over at Seras. She nodded at me twice.

“Then Seras and I will take your old bedroom, if that’s okay.”

I put down our bags and leaned against the wall. “Seems we’re finally getting a break.”

“Yes, I’m happy to find a bed to sleep in. But...” Seras trailed off.

The room we found ourselves in was cramped, and there was little space to stand. Most of the floor was taken up by furniture of various sizes, all covered in dust.

She’s been using this place as a storeroom. Makes sense. Luckily there’s enough space to get through the door and over to the bed...barely. We can leave our bags down here, but I’d need to make more space if I’m going to sleep on the floor.

“Can’t complain about stuff like this though. She did ask us to clean it up, after all. Let’s get that done later, after we’ve checked what Erika wants done in here. You’re okay with that too, right, Seras?”

She was staring over at the bed. “Yes,” she answered finally.

I’m already used to staying in the same room as Seras. It’s not exactly our first time sleeping together. We’ve slept in the same space many times

before, and neither of us mind it at all.

Well, maybe Seras is more self-conscious about it now after what happened.

Slei was resting on a carpet in the corner—in her first stage, she didn't take up much sleeping space.

I'd asked for Piggymaru and Slei to sleep in our room. When Erika heard, she asked, "Won't they...get in the way?" Apparently, she thought Seras and I were in some sort of relationship.

"Pumpyuun..." She looked really tired. I gently stroked her back. "Pumpee....♪."

Piggymaru on the other hand, bounced excitedly onto the bed. "Squee!"

That one's back to its old self already.

"Sir Too-ka, I'd like to ask what time we should sleep tonight," said Seras, sounding strangely formal all of a sudden.

I stopped her from speaking with a gesture and walked over to her. We were close now—almost touching. I brought my mouth to her ear.

"Eh? E-excuse me-?!"

"If you're talking at a normal volume, assume someone is listening," I whispered, leaning in close enough for my breath to reach her ear. "I think we can trust Erika, but we still don't know that for certain. If it's something you don't mind being overhead, though, go ahead."

"Ah... I understand."

"So, is it important?"

"Eh? I-it might be, yes."

"Let's talk about it later then, okay?"

"...Yes." Seras' ears were turning red.

...I was too close, huh.

I backed away from her and started speaking normally again. "I'm glad that Erika seems like such a nice person."

Seras elegantly drew her knees together, sitting upright on the side of the bed.

“Y-yes. I expected her to be, well...much more dignified and hard to talk to.”

“Sorry I’m not dignified enough for you.”

“Whaaa!” Both of Seras’ shoulders twitched in surprise.

I was just about to say something when Erika beat me to it. Erika leaned against the doorframe behind her, just outside her field of vision. Seras, caught between apologizing and trying to explain herself, opened her mouth to speak in panic.

“Miss Erika, I didn’t mean t—”

“You meant to say she’s easy to get along with, right?” I put in.

“Hmm, a compliment then?”

“Of course.”

I looked to Seras for confirmation and she nodded back at me.

“Yes, I have no reason to disparage you, Miss Witch. But...” Seras stood up, turned to face the witch and lowered her head down to her knees. “I deeply apologize if I have offended you in any way.”

Erika narrowed her eyes and lightly crossed her arms. “Seras, you... You’re so serious that it makes you boring—do people ever tell you that?”

Oof. There’s no way she could know about Seras’ hang-up, but still...

Seras turned her head to look up at me.

“Sir Too-ka.” Her eyes said it all—*is it really true?*

The first man who can say, “You’re really fun to talk to, Seras!” without triggering her lie detector is going to have this Princess Knight hooked on him for the rest of her life.

“I already told you, being serious is one of your strongest points. I know all your strengths. Be happy about that for now, won’t you?”

“Ah, b-but... Yes.” Seras nodded, looking a little happier.

“Well, since you’re here, I actually had more I wanted to talk about,” I said, turning to the witch.

“I expected as much. That is why I came.” She looked off down the hallway toward Eve and Lis’ room. “It can be difficult for you to talk in front of those two. There were things I left unsaid, too... And, well, it’s been a really long time since I spoke with anyone from the outside.

Perhaps I got carried away. I might live in isolation out here, but I don't dislike company, you know."

"Can I call you Erika?"

"Call me whatever you like. Erika isn't my real name, anyway..."

Seras looked doubtful upon hearing that.

I guess her lie detector doesn't trigger when the witch calls herself Erika...

"I, like Lisbeth, have only one name—Anaorbael. But, well, it's hard to pronounce, isn't it? I didn't like any of the ways you could shorten it, either. I decided to take it as my family name, and chose Erika from a list of past heroes from another world. Nice ring to it, don't you think? No complaints?"

So she actually treats Erika as her true name—Seras' lie detector doesn't trigger at times like those. I see...

"Ah, and sometimes I refer to myself in other ways too—speaking in the old-fashioned way I did before I chose Erika, you know."

"Yeah. I noticed that a few times."

Talking in a more old-fashioned way fits her appearance better. It's not a bad thing, but I'd just rather not beat around the bush like this, talking about how we talk. I should just agree with her for now.

"Don't you think the name *Erika* sounds younger? It does, doesn't it? Hey, Seras, what do you think? What should I have called myself?"

She's really fixated on this, though. Must be an important subject for her.

"Eh? Ah, I... I think Erika is a wonderful name."

"...I hate safe answers like that," muttered Erika.

Seras looked dejected.

"I take the risks, and Seras balances me out by wisely playing it safe," I cut in.

"You're standing up for your lover a bit much there. Showing off for her, are you?"

"Guess I am."

"Sir Too-ka and I-I aren—" began Seras, but Erika interrupted her before she could finish.

“Just as I thought.”

She's the talkative type. Maybe she really has been starved for conversation out here. Fortunate for me. That means we have more chances to talk, and I get more opportunities to manipulate her.

“My, my, you would be a terribly troublesome opponent...” Erika gazed at Seras. “The spirit of wind, capable of perceiving deception—Silfigzea, I believe? But the Ashrains are not officially contracted to Silfigzea, are they?”

Seras had a serious look on her face.

“...You knew.”

Hmm. So I guess whole families and clans have contracts with spirits too?

“I do not know the specifics, but you made a contract with some lost spirits. The reason you bound yourself to the Holy Empire of Neah... Is it because your own country cast you out for those contracts?”

Seras nodded in silence.

Erika shook her head, as if in self-reproach. “I went too far. Sorry, forget about it. In any case, you’ve got Silfigzea on your side. So, you’re the one who can see through lies, aren’t you?”

Erika looked at me in annoyance.

“Puts me at a real disadvantage in this little game we’ve been playing, doesn’t it.”

“Fine, then. Let’s just be straight with each other,” I said. *To be honest, there’s very little that I need to hide from Erika anyway.*

“I can agree to that. It’d be boring as all heavens trying to tease it out of you.”

“So, what can we talk about that’ll earn me your trust?”

“Let me see... Why do you need the forbidden magic? We can’t even get started until you’ve told me that.” She took a pocket watch from her cleavage, and threw it in my direction. I caught it. “We’ve got plenty of time to talk before you need to rest.”

She can tell that we’re both tired.

My eyes fell to the furniture taking up most of the room.

“I’d like to spend some of that time cleaning up this place.”

“Later. I’ll even help.”

“Hmm, all right, then.” I gripped the pocket watch in one hand and smiled. “Let’s talk then. Let me tell you what it took for us to get here.”

Erika stopped me part-way through.

“Sorry to interrupt but...seriously? You’re joking right?” She put a finger on her temple and wrinkled her brow. “You were sent into the Ruins of Disposal, and survived?” It took a few more seconds for her to get the obvious question out. “You defeated the Soul Eater?”

“Kinda, yeah.”

“What do you mean, *kinda*...?”

“I can explain how I did it, if you like. All the monsters down there were incredibly arrogant and underestimated heroes who were tossed into the Ruins. They treated humans like toys. The Soul Eater was the greatest example of that. Nobody survived those ruins, meaning it had never lost a fight—not even once.”

“Its arrogance gave you an opportunity to strike it, you mean?”

“I think so, yeah. I was saved by the defeat of all the other disposed heroes who came before me.”

Erika stroked her lips with her thin, elegant fingers. “I understand the logic, but still...”

She walked over, bringing her face in close to mine. She was shorter than I was, and so was looking up at me.

“The Soul Eater, killed by *you* of all people.”

I saw my own face reflected in her bluish-purple eyes. There wasn’t any evil in the reflection I saw there... But I didn’t see someone with the strength to kill the Soul Eater either.

She doesn’t believe me. An act worthy of a standing ovation, if I do say to myself. That doubting tone of Erika’s is starting to sound like applause.

“So, how do you know about the Soul Eater anyway?” I asked.

“Hmm?” Erika pulled away from me, and put her hands on her

hips. “There was a time when I was close to Vicius.”

“You used to live in Alion?”

“For a while...it’s complicated. Got out of there fast before things got too serious though.”

“A talented dark elf like you... The Goddess must’ve wanted to get you on her side.”

“She made an offer, yes—I refused. For a while after that I wandered, but it was annoying always having to throw off pursuers, so I came here.”

Pursuers the Goddess sent after her wouldn’t be easy to shake. But she managed to make it here. She must be a strong fighter in her own right.

“I’d always planned to make my home here eventually, in any case. My plans were simply moved up.” Erika stretched her arms up to the ceiling, pushing out her chest. “Okay, we’re getting off topic. So what happened after you left the Ruins of Disposal?”

I told her about our battle with the Black Dragon Knights next.

“Hang on? You’re the one who killed the *Strongest Man in the World*? Not that band of cursed-magic users everybody’s talking about?”

“I’ll tell you about those guys too while we’re at it, I guess.”

Erika nodded along as I ran through our fight with Ashint.

“That explains why they just up and vanished.” She leaned in closer, pointing her finger at my chin with upturned eyes. “Freezing the corpses to ice and then crushing them...what an *interesting* idea. I’m impressed.”

I felt the same way about her. Her familiars were able to give her so much information. It’s like she had a news site—a run down of reports from across the world.

“So that’s how we came to arrive in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters,” I finished, taking a drink of the herb tea a golem had brought in while I was speaking.

Even now I’m testing it for poison—a distrusting person to the very last, aren’t I?

“Then you arrived here, fighting your way through the monsters,” said Erika, licking up a droplet of water on the tip of her index finger. “You’ve done well to survive with those status effect skills or whatever

they are.”

“When it comes to applying status effects, it seems like my skills have some really extraordinary potential.”

Erika sat down on the bed and crossed her legs.

“The skills of heroes are roughly divided into five types, I believe... But of all of them, the lowest are the status effect skills,” she said, raising her finger and sounding a bit like a teacher. “There was a time when I investigated their usefulness as well—their success rate, duration, and effect. All were completely useless. Each one the very definition of a dud.

“That’s just common knowledge,” she added. “So I’m sure Vicius was acting logically in disposing of you. You were bottom of the class, no? Your numbers must’ve been terrible. I can understand why she sacrificed you.”

Blunt—I like that.

“So she sent you down to the Ruins of Disposal, and now you want revenge?”

“Yeah, I do. From the bottom of my heart.”

There’s the matter of the disposed of heroes who came before me too, but the real source of this ugly black feeling inside me is...

“A completely personal grudge. I hate that foul Goddess, plain and simple.”

“Interesting. All those who have spoken up against the Goddess thus far have had grand ideals of righteous victory, or were simply bragging to improve their standing, knowing they would never be capable of facing her. But I feel you intend to carry out your revenge no matter what. You’re strong, seem to have the quick wit and mental fortitude to compensate for your lack of experience in battle, and most importantly have those incredibly powerful status effect skills on your side.”

Then something changed in her eyes, and they seemed to cloud over. “But Vicius, she—”

“She has that Dispel Bubble,” I broke in, speaking those cursed words.

The Goddess’ ability to render all my status effect skills powerless. I’ll

never forget the first time I cast Paralyze—it was on her.

“Hmm, so you already know. Yes, your status effect skills will do nothing against her.”

“I won’t be able to defeat the Goddess unless I can do something about that barrier. There has to be a way. That’s precisely why—”

“Why you came to me to learn about forbidden magic.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m surprised to see that the scrolls still exist. I thought Vicius had them all burned. Not to mention you’ve found three of them, all bundled as one.”

These scrolls of forbidden magic, brought down into the Ruins of Disposal by the Great Sage Anglin—they just might be the last ones still in existence. But if the Goddess is going through all that trouble to burn every copy, that just makes it all the more likely that this magic is her weakness.

Erika brought a knee up to her shoulder, and placed her elbow on it. “I don’t know if this is true of all the divines, but Vicius is unbelievably strong in battle. When humanoid types rarely stumble into the villages of man, she’s capable of killing them all without getting so much as a scratch on her.”

That fireball she used to burn away the golden-eyed wolf, back when she first summoned us here... The way she moved as she knocked Sogou to the ground... I knew she was strong, but it’s that bad, huh? Seras and Eve probably won’t be of much use in my fight against her.

“There are even rumors that she *brainwashed* the Soul Eater itself—she’s abnormal, that Goddess.”

“She brainwashed a humanoid type?”

Erika fell back onto the bed with a huff. I could only just barely make out her expression from where I was standing. She put both hands behind her head and started muttering, as if she was talking to herself.

“If the way humanoid types are born is the way I think they are, I can’t say it would be impossible.”

The mystery of how humanoid types are born... It’s been bothering me too, in the back of my mind ever since we arrived here.

“Let me guess, you think they’re transformations of golden-eyed monsters?”

At those words, Erika bolted upright on the bed. "I'm shocked. You were summoned so recently and you already know so much."

"The humanoid monsters I've encountered so far, they've all been different." No two of them were the same. That made me doubt how they would mate as a common species. They must be born some other way. "Tell me, if you know. How many humanoid types were in the armies of past sources of all evil? Probably none at all, right?"

Erika pointed at me. "Yes, you're right. I think that in the furthest northern reaches, there might not even be any humanoid monsters spawning at all."

"They're born of some sudden change," I said. The source of all evil wasn't the thing spawning them. Likely it was something within the golden-eyed monsters themselves. "And the trigger for that sudden transformation, I think is..."

Erika's bluish-purple eyes met mine, and we both spoke at once:

"...Eating humans."

She flopped back down on the bed with some force, and lying there, raised one of her knees into the air.



“I don’t have any proof...nothing definitive yet. But this is what makes the most sense. I think the likelihood that a monster transforms into a humanoid type depends on...” Erika started.

“...How many humans they’ve eaten?” I finished her sentence.

“That’s what I think, yes.”

“But I get the feeling there are far more golden-eyed monsters than humanoid types. So, it’s safe to assume that even if a monster eats a ton of people, the chance they’ll transform is still quite low.”

Erika raised her head, still lying on the bed. She looked over at me, bending her long, slender legs at the knees.

“Hey, did you learn this in a book or something?”

“This is just a personal theory of mine, based on information I’ve gathered from all the humanoid types I’ve faced so far.”

Erika bounced back up and crossed her legs once more.

“Too-ka...I think I might kinda like you.”

A metallic clatter rang out on the other side of the room. Seras apologized quickly and went to pick up her silver teacup in a panic.

That was probably a reaction to what Erika just said. Well, nothing I can do about that now.

“I’m honored. I still have more questions for you. You mentioned that humanoid types could be brainwashed earlier... What did you mean by th—?” I stopped myself.

I-it can’t be!

Erika closed one eye and snapped her fingers. “I like that perceptive part of you. Finding the answer all on your own like that. Yes, that is correct.”

“That foul Goddess, she fed brainwashed people to the golden-eyed monster until it transformed into the Soul Eater?”

She fed those who had sworn fealty to her to the monster until it changed.

Seras put her hand to her mouth, visibly repulsed by the horror of the Goddess’ methods.

“I think that’s why the Soul Eater listened to what Vicius had to say in the first place.”

That's why it was placed in that comfortable position up there—at the exit to the Ruins of Disposal.

"Erika, do you think Vicius has others? Other monsters she's made with this method, on the same level as the Soul Eater?"

"I can't say. It must have taken her so much trial and error to finally spawn a creature like that one. Maybe it was her only success? If she had more, she would've surely used them in past fights against the source of all evil."

She has a point.

"It's not likely she's succeeded on that level since."

"The Soul Eater was a once-in-a-lifetime creation...a *miracle*. That's how I see it."

"Hmph, a Goddess relying on miracles?"

"There's still a lot we don't know about the divines. Seems like Vicius goes around seeking out and silencing anyone who tries to learn about her, too. Lucky she's not an all-seeing, all-powerful God, aren't we? Well, now..." Erika looked ready to end the conversation. "I'm going to prepare food. You two can rest, clean up, or do whatever you like in here."

"Shall I help?" Seras asked as she lightly balled her fists.

"It's fine. I have my golems for that."

I've learned about Erika's history, information about that foul Goddess, and the true nature of the humanoid types (though it's just a theory for now). That's a good haul...and I don't think I upset Erika with anything I said.

Erika pushed herself up from the bed and walked toward me.

"You're good at getting people to talk, aren't you. I thought I would squeeze you a little, but you really controlled the pace of the conversation. Get caught in your grasp and I'd be the one being squeezed dry. I even tried mixing in some suggestive poses as we spoke, but you didn't seem to get flustered or shoot me any wicked looks worth mentioning. Quite the level of self-control for a boy of your age. But those sorts of reactions are more suspicious by their absence, wouldn't you say?"

"...I *knew* you were doing it on purpose," I replied.

She was testing me as we spoke, wanting me to look at her.

Erika traced a finger across my left shoulder.

“Whether I really start to trust you during your time here—perhaps that’s all up to you? I’ll give you until this shoulder injury of yours heals.” Somehow, she knew that I’d wounded my shoulder, as well. “My, my, it may just be that Vicius has gone and disposed of quite the troublesome foe.”

I watched her leave, then went to sit on the edge of the bed next to Seras. We lowered our voices and talked about our plans—mostly just confirming what both of us already knew.

“We’re going to stay here with the witch. At least until this injury heals.”

“But that’s a rather vague end point, isn’t it?” asked Seras.

“She’s focused on personality and character more than anything else, I think.”

“Miss Erika, you mean? That’s what she’s trying to determine about you?”

“Yeah.” *She wants to know whether she can trust me or not.*

We sat in silence for a moment.

“R-regarding that conversation we were having earlier,” said Seras, breaking the silence. She sat up straight and studied my expression.

“Oh? Ah, about when we’re going to go to bed, right?”

“You remember, then.”

“So, what’s up?”

“I wish for you to use the bed, Sir Too-ka.” Seras turned her body to face me and took both my hands in hers. “You’ve been growing tired after all our days in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Not to mention your injury. Even with those stat modifiers you’ve spoken of, you must be exhausted.”

I figured she’d say something like that.

“You are the most important person in this mercenary band, and...” She hesitated before continuing, bringing my hands closer to her chest. “You are the most important thing to me right now, Sir Too-ka.

So...please.”

She wore a serious expression on her face—her tone was not just earnest but a little forceful too.

She must be thinking I'll refuse the bed. Even if we tidy this place up, there's only one bed in here. I'm sure that golem could make a simple bed for us, but we aren't exactly going to be living here forever. And Erika doesn't want to have to make more pointless furniture for guests who'll be gone soon. Can't blame her for that.

“Ahem, Sir Too-ka. If you insist on my sleeping on the bed, then...” Seras looked down at the ground and shuffled her feet nervously. “...the idea of us sharing it together could...be up for consideration.”

“I guess that’s an option too.” I hadn’t thought of that. Or rather, I’d been refusing to think of that. “I don’t mind that.”

“Y-you wouldn’t mind?”

“I mean, what about you? Are you okay with it?”

Seras’s head tilted further downward. “Of course I have no objections. I was the one who suggested it, so it would be strange of me to...”

She caught herself looking up at me and started again. “Ahem. I mean I proposed it simply as a means for the two of us to both get the greatest possible amount of rest. And so I have no ulterior motives whatsoever in proposing this, please understand.”

I pulled my hands away from hers, and for a moment she tried to catch them again with her own.

“Pretty spacious, this thing,” I said, running my palm across the sheets. “We’ll be able to keep our distance well enough. Can probably avoid accidentally bumping into each other too much while we’re asleep. We might have to sleep in the same bed again some other time on our journey to come. Probably a good idea to get used to it now.”

Seras sat up straight, and placed her hands neatly in her lap.

“I-I’m sorry for offering such an awkward proposal in the first place. Thank you for saying that. I-it is a relief to hear.”

I saw a little guilt in her eyes.

Throwing myself down on the bed, it gave a muffled *wumph* and I

felt soft bedding for the first time in so long. A faint warmth lingered from where Erika had been.

Seras can see through any lie, but she isn't the best at telling them. If this is what she wants—I guess I should go along with it.

"If sleeping next to me bothers you that much, I'll just put you to sleep like usual. You don't need to worry about me. Apparently, I've got quite the level of self-control for a boy of my age," I said, quoting Erika from earlier.

A golem came to fetch us, silently beckoning from the doorway.

Dinner's ready, huh?

Following the golem, we came out into a room with a large table in the center where Eve and Lis were already seated. There were all kinds of dishes stacked up on the table—root vegetables, seeds, fruits...

"I still have some dried meat, but that's to go with my drink. I'm not giving any to you," said Erika, popping a bite between her voluptuous lips as she turned her sharp gaze in our direction.

The kind of food she could get around here must be limited. But since we'd been eating from my leather pouch for a long while now, we hadn't exactly been lacking for variety.

Dinner went off without a hitch.

I'd expected something important to come up, but nothing of note really happened. The witch asked what foods we liked and what tasted good, and we talked about Lis' connection to Eve. The thing Erika was most interested in was my magic leather pouch. After dinner was over, I ended up having to show her how it worked.

"Th-this is kind of exciting...isn't it, Big Sister?"

"Hmph. Not knowing what's going to come out always makes me a little nervous, yes."

It's just like a mystery raffle, I guess.

"Heh heh... Don't get too worked up, or Sir Too-ka will start feeling pressured, you two," laughed Seras, like a caring older sister.

But she's practically on the edge of her seat too. I should've known—Seras is the one who's most excited about this.

What came out of the pouch this time was...matcha pudding. There were seven in total in black plastic containers made to look like earthen vases, with a little plastic spoon attached to each. The deep green pudding was topped with light whipped cream.

These things look kinda expensive. Perfect for dessert.

“Eh, what is this? It’s delicious!” said Erika after her first mouthful, her eyes opening wide. She carefully licked the cream off her fingers.

“Hmph. A bitter flavor, but this white wobbly stuff gives the perfect aftertaste,” grunted Eve. There was still cream under her nose.

“Nhh... Mnhh... I-it’s delicious, Mr. Too-ka... Thank you!” Lis was smiling too, chomping away happily. She presented a spoonful to the little slime. “Here’s yours, Piggymaru!”

“Squee? Squ, squ, squ...squee?! Squee♪.”

Lis gave some to Slei too, who licked up the spoonful and swished her tail happily while making noises of contentment.

Seras was sitting bolt upright in her chair.

“I agree that this pudding is delicious—but be careful you all don’t get carried away,” she said, barely able to conceal the smile spreading across her face.

After dinner Seras and I had returned to our room to clean up a little, and Erika came by with a suggestion.

“Don’t like being all dusty, do you? You must be all sweaty too. I’ll show you to my hot bath. Come.”

No complaints here. I’d planned to wipe myself off with a cloth, but that likely wouldn’t have done much good. But Seras and I could hardly bathe together, right?

“Please go first, Sir Too-ka. A knight should never bathe before her king.”

So, I went first at Seras’ insistence. The bath, which was three floors down from our room, was huge. Like a natural hot spring, the water was just the right temperature—it felt great.

After washing away all my aches and fatigue, I went back to the room to wait for Seras to take her turn.

After a while, she walked into the bedroom, her hair still soaking wet.



“To think I would be able to soak in hot water, all the way out here in the depths of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.” Seras sat down on the side of the bed wearing only a thin shirt after her bath. She began drying her hair with a cloth. “*Haah...* Being able to wash your whole body and hair like that—it really did feel quite wonderful.”

“You really like baths, don’t you?”

“Yes... Almost as much as I like reading old books. Heh heh, I’m sure I couldn’t possibly choose between the two.”

I sat on the floor, closing my copy of *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works*, and looking at the things I had spread out in front of me.

“What are you doing?” asked Seras.

“Just checking how much more I need for Piggymaru’s next monster enhancement solution.” Laid out before me were all the materials I’d gathered on our journey.

Seras came closer, leaning forward and peeking over my shoulder. “Any luck?”

“I still have one more thing left to find. But hey, once I’ve got that, Piggymaru can get even stronger.”

The little slime wobbled about on the floor nearby, squeaking happily.

“Those materials...do you think you can use them all?” asked Seras.

Realized right away, eh? These materials are from humanoid types, but the book doesn’t say anything about them having useful materials.

“If my theory about monster transformations is right, then there should still be some usable material left over from whatever species of monster these humanoid types *used to be*...that’s what I’m thinking, anyway.”

“I see. You speculate that their materials can be used just as any other monster’s can.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” I tapped the cover of the book with my fingers. “In any case, once Piggymaru gets up to the next level of enhancement, it’ll expand what we can do together in combat even more.”

I have to crush that Goddess no matter what. I can’t pin all my hopes

on forbidden magic. I have to raise the standard of my other combat skills too.

I have to plan ahead—make a backup plan, and then another. I’ve always got to be thinking several steps ahead of my enemies.

I heard Seras swallow hard behind me. Even she seemed surprised by how loud it sounded.

“Sir Too-ka.”

“Hmm?” I turned to see Seras still brushing her hair—she averted her eyes.

“Sh-shall we go to sleep?”

“I have to tidy up this stuff first—go ahead and get into bed if you want.”

“Ah, then I’ll stay up a little longer, too.” She went over to her own things and crouched down, rummaging around in her bag for something, then taking out a light jacket.

Must think her clothes are a bit revealing.

She pulled on the jacket, and I finished tidying up the materials before climbing into bed. I switched off the mana lamp and looked over at the candles on the other side.

“Seras, could you get those too?”

“Ah, yes.” She blew out the candles, and the room was dark. There was a large window on one wall and moonlight shone through.

We were underground, but there was a whole night sky out there, with a moon and everything. I felt like I was in a science fiction movie. Piggymaru was down under the bed, and Sleis was still sleeping where I’d asked her to earlier.

I lay next to Seras. The bed was big enough that it might almost fit three people. If both of us were careful, we could avoid touching. Seras had her back to me but I could still hear her breathing—she wasn’t asleep.

“Sir Too-ka...are you still awake?”

“Yeah.”

“It appears we’re finally going to learn the secret of the forbidden magic, doesn’t it?”

The Ruins of Disposal... The Black Dragon Knights... Ashint... The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters... The Forbidden Witch...

I can't tell if it's been a long journey, or if it was all over in a flash.

"I only made it here because of you, Seras."

"You honor me."

I looked up at the ceiling. "Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

I felt her jump, but I waited a short while for her to speak.

"What are you going to do, Sir Too-ka? Once your journey for revenge is over," she asked nervously.

"Once my revenge is done... Huh. I haven't thought about it all that much. If there's a way, I'd want to return to my old world at least once."

"To meet with your foster mother and father—the ones you've spoken of?"

"Yeah."

Just one word would be enough. I want to thank them for everything they've given me.

"What about you, anyway?" I asked. "Everybody in the world thinks Seras Ashrain is dead, right?"

"Yes... I hadn't given it much consideration myself, either. In their eyes I have already died once, I suppose."

"Don't you want to go see that princess again?"

She always has those charms around her neck—the ones the Princess of the Holy Empire of Neah gave her.

"Unlike in your case Sir Too-ka, I was able to say my goodbyes to her."

"I guess the princess is to you what my foster parents are to me, huh?"

"Heh heh, yes I suppose you're right." laughed Seras.

"Back when you were a runaway, didn't you mention wanting to take a boat from Yonato to another continent?"

"Yes. But, now..." She gracefully turned her body and looked

straight at me. “Now I know that my place is with *you*, my king. I am yours now—I have sworn it.”

There was a heat in her gaze. Her white, young skin turned ever so slightly to cherry blossom pink. Her golden hair, like fine silk, lay in waves across her pillow. Her long ears began to change color too.

She’s probably still feeling hot from her bath...

“Ah... I-I’m sorry, I...” She turned her back to me once more. Her nervous excitement was palpable.

“Want me to put you to sleep then?” I asked, reaching over toward her. Seras intercepted it, holding my hand in hers.

“Ah, I-I don’t want it tonight... If you don’t mind.”

“Sure. Just let me know if you can’t get to sleep, okay?”

We lay on our backs side by side for another ten minutes or so.

“This is the first time I’ve slept in a bed next to a boy.”

“First time I’ve slept next to a girl, too.”

“But, you seem so calm...” she said, puffing out her cheeks a little.

She doesn’t usually get mad—I guess she’s thinking I should be more bothered by all this.

“Seras... You’re a friendly person, you’re beautiful, and really charming you know? You should be confident in that,” I said plainly. “Out of all the girls in this other world, you’re the one I like the best.”

With a start, she turned her body to face me again, and looked me straight in the eyes.

“You know I’m not lying, right?” I said.

“Ah...y-yes.”

“And well, how should I put this... It’s not just you. Erika said it too, right? I’m kinda mellow for a boy my age.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I have a good idea about why that is. We’ll talk about it some other time.”

I don’t want to talk about my foul parents, but if it’s with Seras I might not mind.

Her eyes softened. “Yes...I’ll be waiting. Ehm, Sir Too-ka.”

“Hmm?”

“There’s something I have to tell you too—someday.”

What happened in that cave, huh.

“All right. Someday.”

“Yes, someday.”

We lay in silence for a while.

Then Seras suddenly brought her face in close to my chest, her whole body following as if drawn toward me, creeping in closer and closer. I could hear her heart beating. Even in the dark, I could sense her blushing, and the stiffness in her small shoulders pressing against me.

“Ah, what am I... I’m sorry!” She apologized, her voice faint amidst the panting. “I got carried away.”

Got carried away, eh? I guess she just tends to let her instincts take the wheel sometimes, just like she did back in that cave.

“S-Sir Too-ka, I can’t stand it any longer... W-will you cast Sleep on me?” Her eyes were bleary, and she looked exhausted, almost like someone’s cast a confusion spell on her.



“Sure, leave it to me.” I breathed in, and waved my hand in front of her face.

She fell into a deep sleep so fast, it was unnatural.

Well, I guess it actually is unnatural...

I shifted her back over to her side of the bed, and tucked her in. She still looked a little red-faced but was now sleeping peacefully. I propped my head up on my hand and watched her for a while.

“You’re a weird one, Seras,” I said, as if I wanted her to hear. I pulled the sheets up and settled back down, lying face up toward the ceiling.

Seras isn’t going to wake up until the effect wears off.

No matter what I say. No matter what I do.

“Piggymaru.”

“Squ?”

“I’m going to sleep. Let me know if anything strange happens, okay?”

“Squee...!” “*Roger that!*” the little slime seemed to squeal at me—at a lowered volume though, sensing that Seras was asleep.

“You’re way too good at all this, Piggymaru,” I said, smirking as I quietly closed my eyes to sleep.

SOGOU AYAKA

SOGOU AYAKA WENT WEST with the army of Alion, bound for Shinad, capital of Magnar. Ayaka rode on horseback, but most of her classmates were in carriages. As high school students in modern-day Japan, they didn’t typically have any experience with horseback riding. They had all been given practice lessons, but only a few managed to pick up the skill—Sogou Ayaka, Kiriara Takuto, Yasu Tomohiro, two from Kiriara’s group (a boy and a girl), and Suou Kayako.

Oyamada Shougo was sitting in the back of one of the carriages, muttering curses to himself, and in a terrible mood

“They could’a at least kept me away from the freakin’ dregs! I’m a winner, y’know! This equality *bullshit* is really killin’ my vibe here!”

Many of the heroes weren’t with them—the Takao sisters were with the eastern forces, along with the Knights of Alion and Nyantan Kikipat. The eastern armies were mostly made up of Alionese and Magnari soldiers—the White Wolf Riders of Magnar among them.

Ikusaba Asagi’s group was with the forces in the west, accompanied by the Sabre-toothed Tigers. Her group had all left several days earlier on fast horses to make it there in time. Magnar had been attacked in the west by the Demon King’s armies the other day, their cities completely annihilated and overrun. It was rumored that even the former Chief Rider of the White Wolf Riders had died.

“The Holy Order of the Purge, led by the Holy Priest of Yonato has rushed to the scene, and is pushing them back as we speak,” the Goddess told them all some days after Asagi’s group’s departure. She had received news from the west by magical war pigeon—a special messenger bird used mostly by the wizards’ guild to exchange information. Ayaka’s group were in the north, confronting the Demon Empire’s forces as they made their way south.

Ayaka turned on her horse to survey the area.

So this is an army going to war... Incredible, no matter how many times I see it.

The soldiers formed neat columns, a line stretching up and down gentle hills way off into the distance. Their armor made a cacophony of irregular clinking and clattering sounds as they moved. A strange mix of boredom and anticipation hung in the air.

Ayaka wasn’t used to any of this yet.

I thought I was getting accustomed to this world, but these strange feelings—like I’m caught in a dream or the plot of some movie—they’ve just come flooding back all at once.

The Goddess rode with the troops, leading them from within an extravagant litter with an expensive looking canopy above it. That Goddess however, was just a decoy—the real one rode on horseback with her hood pulled down over her face, in case of ambush.

I’m used to fighting monsters by now. It scares me a little to think how used to it I’ve become.

Ayaka looked out over the land again, and her expression hardened.

No. I'm fighting to protect my friends. I don't love killing. I'm doing this to protect them. I'm only killing to...

"You okay?"

It was Suou Kayako, riding beside her. She didn't have any experience with riding, but she was a quick learner, and managed to get the hang of it brilliantly in the little time she had to practice.

To be honest, I feel like she could even make it in Kirihara or Asagi's group now.

"Ah, Suou-san. I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Something weird about you lately."

"Eh? About me?"

"You've been pushing yourself too hard."

"I think you might be right. No. I *know* you are. But I have to be strong for everyone."

A slight shadow fell over Kayako's face. "I hate it."

"Eh?"

"I can't tell you we're all here for you, that it's all going to be okay—I hate that. There's too big a gap between our stat levels and yours, Sogou-san."

"That's not true! Everyone's doing so well. I think it just shocked me to see some of our classmates die. And it worries me."

The death of those two male students in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters had been a huge shock to all the members of Ayaka's group.

Of course it was a shock. We used to sit next to each other in the same classroom—those boys we were our classmates! Now they're dead.

"It's not the same as it was with Mimori-kun," said Kayako.

"No, it's not."

When Mimori Touka died, there wasn't even a corpse to speak of—no real sign to bring home the fact that he was gone forever. The way those two boys looked after they died, though, was burned into the memory of everyone who saw them.

But I'm sure that's a natural reaction. The way Kirihara-kun and Asagi-san barely reacted at all, though...that wasn't normal.

But what about me? I was shocked at first, but I'm basically back to fighting monsters the same way I've always been. Perhaps I have less heart than I thought.

"I heard that, compared to Hijiri-san and Kirihara-san, you're developing slowly...for an S-class. It's because we're dragging you down, aren't—"

"Suou-san," Ayaka interrupted, scolding her. "You don't need to worry about anything, please. I'll protect everybody in 2-C, no matter what happens."

"Then I would rather appreciate it if you could learn a unique skill sooner rather than later. Still not feeling up to the task?" The Goddess drew her horse level with Ayaka's on her right. A jolt of fear ran through Kayako's eyes. All the members of Ayaka's group had trouble dealing with the Goddess. Ayaka herself was no exception, no matter how often they spoke. "I'm sorry. I am trying the best that I can."

"I don't want you to *try* your best. I want you to *do* it. It's pointless to focus all your efforts in the wrong direction, even small children know that." She smirked and brought her hands together as if pleading with Ayaka. "Please? Can't I ask this of you? At this rate the whole S-class state of Alion is going to lose its fine reputation—its very selling point as a nation. Really, it does so inconvenience me."

Ayaka could do nothing but apologize.

"I-I'm sor—"

A man's voice cut her off. "I don't know if it's in the right direction, but she really is tryin' the best she can."

"Oh, is that you, Bane-san?" The Goddess turned her head to look at him. "What on earth are you thinking, barging into our conversation like this? It truly, deeply bothers me, you know. What drove you to such behavior? Are you getting enough sleep?"

Kayako appeared to have fallen back, silently allowing Banewolf to take her place on Ayaka's left.

"Suou-chan, Sogou-chan—all the members of their group are growing just fine. Sogou-chan's finding ways to fight with the skills that she has right now. She's trying so hard it worries me. Just working

herself to the bone, 'specially lately. I think she's more than strong enough already, and I'm the strongest warrior in Ulza. I'm the Dragonslayer ain't I?"

"Ugh, it does seem to me that you're quite soft on her Bane-san. It...well, frankly, it rather makes me doubt your intentions, you know?"

"Course I'm worried about her, she's one of my pupils."

"I'll have no more bald-faced lies, if you please. Sogou-san is ever so beautiful, isn't she? Those clothes make her look slim, of course, but her chest is so bountiful, it's practically indecent, isn't it? She spends all her days slyly flirting with you. A man like you simply must have ulterior motives."

No. It can't be!

Putting aside the comments about her body, flirting with boys was unthinkable for Ayaka—slanderous, even.

But, maybe... I'm not aware of it myself?

"You're expecting something in return from Sogou-san, aren't you Bane-san? Excuse my bluntness, but that's exactly how it appears."

"I think your mind's in the gutter. It's not befitting a Goddess, y'know?"

"How mean! How despicable! Truly horrible. That's a cruel accusation."

"So—what's got you so angry anyway?" The tone of Banewolf's voice changed.

"Hmm? What's this all of a sudden?" The Goddess asked with an insincere smile plastered on her face.

"Ever since the Demon Empire made their move, you've been kinda on edge, haven't you?"

He's taking a risk by saying anything at all, but still doesn't sound confrontational.

The Goddess looked like she was trying to parse whether Banewolf was challenging her or not.

He continued, "Just a guess, but this isn't all about Sogou-chan, now is it? If you're worried about something, why don't we talk it out?"

"Oh, my. You're a kind one, aren't you, Bane-san? Ever so kind."

“You’re the leader with this whole continent’s future on her back. If you’re not holding strong up at the top, it’s going to affect the little guys all down the line, ain’t it?”

“...Hmm, did I truly appear so upset?”

“Looked that way to me at least.” Banewolf put a toothpick into his mouth.

The Goddess tapped her fingertips together. She appeared to be considering something, or repressing some emotion to keep it from getting out.

“I see. You were kindly trying to encourage me then... I do apologize for the misunderstanding. Oh, that’s deeply regrettable. I’m sorry Sogou-san, I was only thinking of what’s best for you. You’ll forgive me, won’t you? At least your kindness is on an S-class level.”

“No...I mean, there’s nothing to forgive.” The words caught in Ayaka’s throat.

“Why’re you always making so many comments like those, eh Goddess?” said Banewolf, scratching his head and giving her a wry smile.

“Oh, now *you* have etiquette lessons for *me*. Incredible, truly! Ah, I just remembered I have something to attend to. Farewell.”

The Goddess spurred her horse on and rode past them. Ayaka suddenly realized that all the soldiers surrounding her had moved away too, keeping a set distance in a ring around her.

“Hey. Don’t worry about her nit-picking,” said Banewolf.

“Excuse me, Bane-san, why did you agree to teach us, when no-one else volunteered?”

“Like I said last time ya asked...just a fan of being lazy. Gotta protect my way of life, y’know?”

“But...” From the way he said it, Ayaka knew he was only joking. Banewolf snorted at her reaction.

“Ahh, I’m just joshing around, y’know. Wish that Monster Slayer King could learn a thing or two from you,” said Banewolf, his expression growing lighter. “That said, I don’t really have some great reason for coming out to help. It’s just the stronger you are, the more likely you’ll survive. That goes for Yasu and you both, Sogou-chan.”

He was usually so flippant, but in that moment, Ayaka saw something in him she could rely on.

He took the toothpick from his mouth and flicked it to the ground before turning to glance at Kayako. “Look, I know this might sound a bit preachy, but you should learn to lean on other people more, Sogou-chan. Don’t keep it all bottled up.”

“I won’t. Thank you, Bane-san.”

He gave her an ironic smile but then appeared to lose heart. “What’m I doing anyway, puttin’ on airs in front of some kids a decade or more younger’n me? I’m gettin’ old. Always swore I’d never turn into some lecturing grown-up some day. Ah...I don’t wanna get old.”

Ayaka felt calm for the first time in a long time, as if she had room to breathe.

“Bane-san.”

“Yup?”

She steeled her heart.

“Thank you for the words of encouragement, but...” She suddenly frowned at him, her expression turning stern. “Littering is a disgusting habit! Tossing away that toothpick as you did just now...”

Ayaka couldn’t shake the bad reputation that littering had in her old world.

“O ho ho! So this is what you look like when you’re angry, eh, Sogou-chan?”

Ayaka puffed out her chest.

“I was called *Demon Sogou* when I was class representative at junior high, after all.” A nostalgic smile spread across her face. She caught Kayako out of the corner of her eye looking a little more relieved too. “Bane-san, Is it true the Goddess is irritated right now?”

Banewolf picked up the fallen toothpick and jammed it in his breast pocket before answering.

“Heard Agit of the Four Holy Elders saying she’s been real tough to deal with of late, and he’s known the Goddess longer’n any of us. So yeah—it ain’t just me talkin’.”

“Is it because the Demon Empire is on the move?”

“I don’t think that’s quite it,” replied Banewolf, taking out another toothpick. Ayaka stared daggers at him, and he muttered, “I’m not gonna throw it on the ground this time, okay?”

Then he continued, “Look, the reason the Goddess is so pissed is because the fall of the Black Dragon Knights was the final straw.”

“You mean the ones that were rumored to be the strongest knights on the continent?”

“Yeah. I think Vicius was secretly really counting on them in the fight against the Demon Empire. *Especially* that Civit Gartland guy—she even went as far as calling him an *incomprehensible power* y’know.”

The heroes from another world were only strong because of the Goddess’ blessings. But Civit Gartland was different, it seemed. He didn’t need a blessing.

“He was unnaturally strong, even looking back through history nothing compares. The Goddess put a lot of stock in him for the war to come.”

“He was killed, suddenly, wasn’t he?”

“Yup. That’s left the Goddess racking her brains tryna make this war pan out. But if Civit were still alive,” Banewolf lowered his voice as he continued, “then Vicius mighta been willing to cut down on the number of heroes a bit more.”

“Eh?”

“Th’ Goddess is scared of this source of all evil, right? But what d’ya think scares her second most?”

“What else could the Goddess possibly have to fear?”

“You. All’a you.”

“Ah—”

“Some heroes in the past have taken up arms against the Goddess after the evil’s been vanquished. I wouldn’t be surprised if Vicius was tryin’ to be more *selective* this time, if you catch my drift.”

S-selective...

“But it’s dangerous for her to whittle down your numbers too much before the Demon Empire’s taken care of, see? We still don’t know how strong the enemy is this time around. Might shake out that by the time we realize we’re shorthanded, it’ll be too late to do anythin’

about it.”

“But if the Strongest Man in the World were still alive...” said Ayaka, realization dawning.

“The Goddess mighta already disposed of some of you—just the ones she didn’t really need, y’know?” said Banewolf.

A chill ran down her spine.

This concerns me directly. I know the Goddess doesn’t much care for me. I might be an S-class, but I don’t even have a unique skill yet.

Oyamada Shougo had even reduced her to an insulting nickname—whenever he had the chance, he called her the *S-class impostor*.

Perhaps I would’ve been one of the heroes she planned to discard.

That would put the Goddess’ treatment of her in some perspective.

Is it because she wanted me out of the picture? So now every time she looks at me, it just irritates her? Perhaps I would’ve been disposed of, just as Mimori-kun was.

“But with Civit dead, she’s gotta rely on all you heroes whether she likes you or not,” continued Banewolf. “If he was still alive, Civit mighta been the one sent to kill you off after you heroes got too strong. You guys don’t give off Demon King Essence after all.”

What’s going to happen after the Demon Empire is defeated? I hadn’t even thought about that. I thought we would just be sent right back to our old world. That’s what was promised—the Goddess has to send us back.

“So the ones who took out the Black Dragon Knights are s’posed to be this band of cursed-magic users called Ashint, right? But nobody knows where they went,” said Banewolf, his expression turning somewhat mysterious. “I bet Vicius feels like she’s leaving a lot undone back in Ulza. She bets it all on Civit, then he gets taken out in one hit by some weird curse nobody can make heads or tails of. Then the people who caused the curse go missing. It’s gotta be bothering her.”

Banewolf snorted, and looked over at her again.

“But hey, I guess Ashint saved some of your guys’ lives indirectly, eh?”

“The cursed-magic users,” muttered Ayaka to herself, as if internalizing the name. She knew almost nothing of Civit, and had never met him, but...

If he was so strong that even Bane-san and the Goddess thought he was special, then the ones who defeated him... What terrifying power do they wield?

“But I hear Ashint disappeared from somewhere outside Monroy without a trace. Even if they did head off into the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, there’ve been no sightings of them ever since. It’s weird. Well, weird was always their thing, I guess.” Banewolf shifted the toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “Anyway, our Goddess likes to be above it all y’know—keepin’ everything within her grasp. Ashint must be on her mind, and it’s for sure affecting her plans and the way she’ll handle you heroes in the future.

“Some lowly little group pops up and throws all her plans into chaos, well when you put it all like that,” Banewolf smiled, “I get why she’d be angry.”

A courier came riding up from the Goddess—a summons directed at Banewolf. He gave a bitter smile, and ran his fingers through his messy hair.

“Guess she doesn’t want me telling you things you don’t need to know, eh Sogou-chan? Jeez...”

But with no reason to refuse, he said his goodbyes and left.

“My business with him is concluded,” said the Goddess, returning some time later to take Banewolf’s place. She smiled at Ayaka. “When you flirt with men, they do tend to jump to your defense at times like these—convenient, isn’t it? Such worldly wisdom you have. But don’t spend it all on seduction. Hurry up and learn a unique skill too, won’t you?”

The Goddess brought her hand to her mouth in surprise.

“Ah, oh, I’m so sorry...I must be more careful. I was simply acting as I always have, and for some reason you’ve all been interpreting that as stress on my part. Oh, it’s all your fault, Sogou-san.”

“Goddess Vicius!” Called a courier as he rode up, drawing his horse level with the Goddess’. “A message for you by magical war pigeon.”

“Yes, very good.” She quickly opened the scroll he handed her, and scanned its contents before handing it back. “Will you read it aloud

for everyone else to hear?”

“Yes! O-of course!”

The courier began to read, cries of amazement rising from the soldiers as he continued.

The message concerned the battle in the east. The White Wolf Riders had struck out from the fortress of Ila on the frontlines, led by the Chief Rider Sogude Sigmus himself. The Takao sisters had also been with the troops, as they engaged the Demon Empire in battle and...won a complete and total victory in the field!

It was estimated that at least 2000 monsters had been killed in the fighting. For the time being, the enemy’s eastern advance had been halted, and the impact that the “Black Wolf” Sogude Sigmus had in battle could not be ignored.

“The Takao sisters—the S-class Hijiri Takao in particular—were said to have performed incredibly well in combat. All those who witnessed her fight said she compared even to Sogude Sigmus himself in strength.”

A spark of hope appeared in the courier’s eyes as he read those words.

“These heroes from another world—they really are our saviors,” his heart seemed to cry out. *“We can win.”* When they had marched off from Alion, a feeling of boredom and anxiety had set in across the ranks of soldiers, but there was another, darker emotion lurking underneath—fear. The annihilation that had taken place on the western front shook each and every one of them. But news of this victory pushed that fear from their hearts, leaving in its place a renewed and overwhelming will to fight.

“We can do this! We can win! Even in the west, the Holy Priest is pushing back the Demon Empire’s lines with the Holy Order of the Purge, ain’t she!”

Ayaka watched the message pass down the columns of soldiers before her very eyes, their faces lighting up as they heard the news.

“When I heard how many we’d be up against... Yeah, I was a bit scared y’know.”

“Who knows what that Demon King Essence’ll do to us?”

“But we’re fighting them off fine, ain’t we. Even in the west,

they're keeping 'em at bay without the heroes help! That means we can do it too!"

"And heck, we've got the Goddess, the Four Holy Elders and the Dragonslayer on our side! Those White Wolf Riders and the Holy Order of the Purge don't have nothin' on us!"

"Those heroes from another world are amazing too! It hasn't even been six months since they were summoned here, yeah?! But they're already on the level of the Black Wolf. They're our saviors! I always knew they were!"

The soldiers naturally began to turn and look toward the heroes, expectation shining in their eyes. Ayaka looked down at the ground.

I just hope we can live up to them.

"Heh heh heh, the Black Wolf delivers as always. The most important thing in a battle is the morale of one's troops. The Holy Priest understands that well, which is no doubt why she chose to launch a counter-offensive so quickly," said the Goddess, looking out over the soldiers as they rejoiced. The tragedies at Argyle and Shishibapa struck fear into the hearts of every soldier on the continent, after all."

I see. The Holy Priest wanted to send news of her victory to the other troops on the frontlines as quickly as possible, to mend their broken morale.

Ayaka was impressed.

That's why she rode out against them—not defending against their waves but attacking from a position of strength. There's a big difference there. We can't underestimate the value that her fame brings to the battlefield either.

A symbol of triumph gives courage to everyone around her. With the news of victory, the soldiers' pessimism has just been swept away. Maybe that's what it means to be a hero...giving courage to people who have lost hope.

Ayaka didn't mind being called a hero when she thought of it like that.

"...Vicius."

The Goddess turned to Kirihara, who was now riding along beside her. "Yes, what is it?"

"This fight—you *have* prepared a worthy mission for me I hope? I

won't be at all pleased with you if you've gotten this wrong."

"You're an important trump card of mine, Kirihara-san. It would be a shame to play you so carelessly."

"I get that's how you have to do things, but I know you're a master of lying too, Goddess. If it turns out all the fighting is decided on the eastern and western fronts, then you'll be branded a failure as a Goddess, nothing more."

"Eh? What was that?"

"Averting your eyes and putting your hands over your ears are the actions of the weak. Don't run away from reality..."

"Heh heh heh, such a sharp tongue, Kirihara-san. You mean to say you feel that Hijiri-san has somewhat gotten ahead of you?"

Kirihara brazenly swung left and right with the motions of his horse, not even turning his head to look at the Goddess.

"Course people would think that... But there would be nothing worse for this world than to have them view Hijiri as their ruler... For them to misunderstand who their king really is, so to speak." Kirihara slowly turned his head to the side, and cracked his neck. "I have to show the whole world who has the true stuff of kings in this battle to come. It's fate..."

"Do you want to become a king, Kirihara-san?" asked the Goddess.

"It's not about what I want, it's going to happen no matter what. I'm going to be king, provided I have space and means to demonstrate my power. In other words..." Kirihara sighed. "The *Kirihara* inside me won't let me escape the throne."

"You mean to become a king, and rule over a country?"

"...Possible. I may also find a suitable woman to give my seed to, and leave talented descendents to live in this world... Though I don't know how many would be worthy of such an honor..."

"None of your classmates?"

"Maybe only Hijiri or Ayaka would do specifically for that purpose... But they would really get in the way if they followed me back to the old world. That Princess Knight of Neah has died, you say?"

"Yes, so it would appear."

“Tch... So that just leaves the Queen of Yonato and her Holy Priest. Nyantan too, but...I have doubts about her lineage. Filth in her blood would cloud any child born of Kirihara.”

“The Artlight sisters of the White Wolf Riders are rumored to be quite beautiful and talented too, you know—and the daughters of noble houses, no less.”

“I don’t mind paying them a visit if the mood strikes me. But first, I must demonstrate my divine right to be the king. To show everyone I’m not some loser who’s all talk. To get results.” Kirihara brushed back his hair. “Nobody has been able to keep up with my leveling... I’m at 279 now. Over 50 higher than Hijiri in second place. You understand that...? Our leveling has slowed, but I’m still over 50 levels ahead. It shows how much of a hierarchy there is among S-class heroes...”

Kirihara took his right hand off the reins and held it out in front of him, as if putting on a show for someone.

“Nobody can surpass Kirihara. Nobody.”

Oyamada leaned halfway out of his carriage—it seemed he’d been listening. “Like, aren’t you just gonna smash the whole Demon Empire by yourself, Takuto?! Like, like, does this *isekai* story even need that loser Yasu S-class impostor, or the crazy twins-?! Hey, Goddess! Why’d we need them anyway?!”

Kirihara tightened his grip on the reins as he looked back at Oyamada.

“This is a story of self-realization, Shougo...for them to all learn their place. Without weaklings like them, it’d be hard to comprehend my strength. That’s why our whole class was summoned. Once we’re back in the old world, our hierarchy will be set in stone... I won’t let them get away with—”

“To be, like, honest, the Takaos and Asagi are so freakin’ irritating! They mess up the whole balance of the group! Puttin’ out vibes like they’re kinda at the top of the class, it pisses me off! We leave them alone, and they’ll breed more stinkin’ losers like that dead, disposed of Mimori-chan.”

“Died in such a gruesome way, that Mimori. First to get picked off—the typical fate of the background character.” Yasu spoke up, a twisted smile on his lips. “Mimori was just a fake. *I* am the real thing. We have both arrived perfectly at our respective destinations. I, at

heart, am the main character of this story, and Mimori in his heart was a mere background character.”

“Huh?! You’re *still* gettin’ cocky over there, Yasu?! Seriously like, you’re some whole different spin-off character now or what?!”

“Jealous of the real thing, are you? Oh, how it warms my heart. You do at least suit the role of Kirihara’s dog rather well, Oyamada. Dogs and horses never did get along.”

“I’ll kill you!”

“*Muah hah*. For someone who is always being put in their place by the eldest daughter of the Four Holy Elders, you do howl a big game! *Muah hah hah!* Pathetic! Pitiabile! Worthless!”

“Ah, man I’m seriously gonna kill you!”

“I told you not to interact with him, Shougo,” said Kirihara, stopping him.

“But c’mon, Takuto! We gotta teach him his place sooner or later! No freakin’ internet here to post videos showing how pathetic he is, y’know.”

“That is what happens to weaklings when they rise above their station... A newly rich fool who can’t handle his money... But in the end, Yasu is merely a clown. Before long, he will crumble.”

“Pfft! You’re so, like, totally right! You get all that, loser?”

“*Muah hah*, finally Kirihara is reduced to howling like a mongrel as well. *Muah hah hah!* Oh, how you must fear the Hero of the Black Inferno! Wonderful, that feels truly wonderful!”

“You grow less redeemable by the day, Yasu Tomohiro...” said Kirihara.

“Oh, what marvelous ambition you’re all showing!” said the Goddess, clapping her hands together and smiling broadly at them all.

On their way to the capital of Magnar, Ayaka’s group planned to rest at a place called the White Citadel of Protection. They were still several days from there when more news came to them by magical war pigeon. The courier handed the scroll to the Goddess who read it as she always did.

The color drained from her expression in an instant.

“Has something happened?” asked Agit Angun of the Four Holy Elders.

“Monsters have been massing on the eastern front—there has been a huge sudden spike in their number.”

“A sudden spike? They’ve been hiding their true strength, you mean?”

“No. With a movement of this size, we should have at least sensed them coming.”

“So, they appeared out of nowhere?”

“So it would seem,” said the Goddess. Her expression was uncharacteristically grave.

“The White Wolf Riders on the eastern front have abandoned the fortress of Ile and retreated to the castle of Horn. They fell back quickly, so their losses were minimal, it seems, but...” The Goddess spoke softly—Ayaka could barely hear her from where she was sitting.

Unlike news of victory, this isn't the kind of message she wants spreading through the ranks.

“Does this mean the enemy has some way of moving large numbers of soldiers in an instant? I mean... You’ve gotta be kidding me, jeez.”

“No. They would’ve used it for an ambush if they possessed such magic, or to ensure our forces had no means of retreat.”

“Ah, I guess you’re right.”

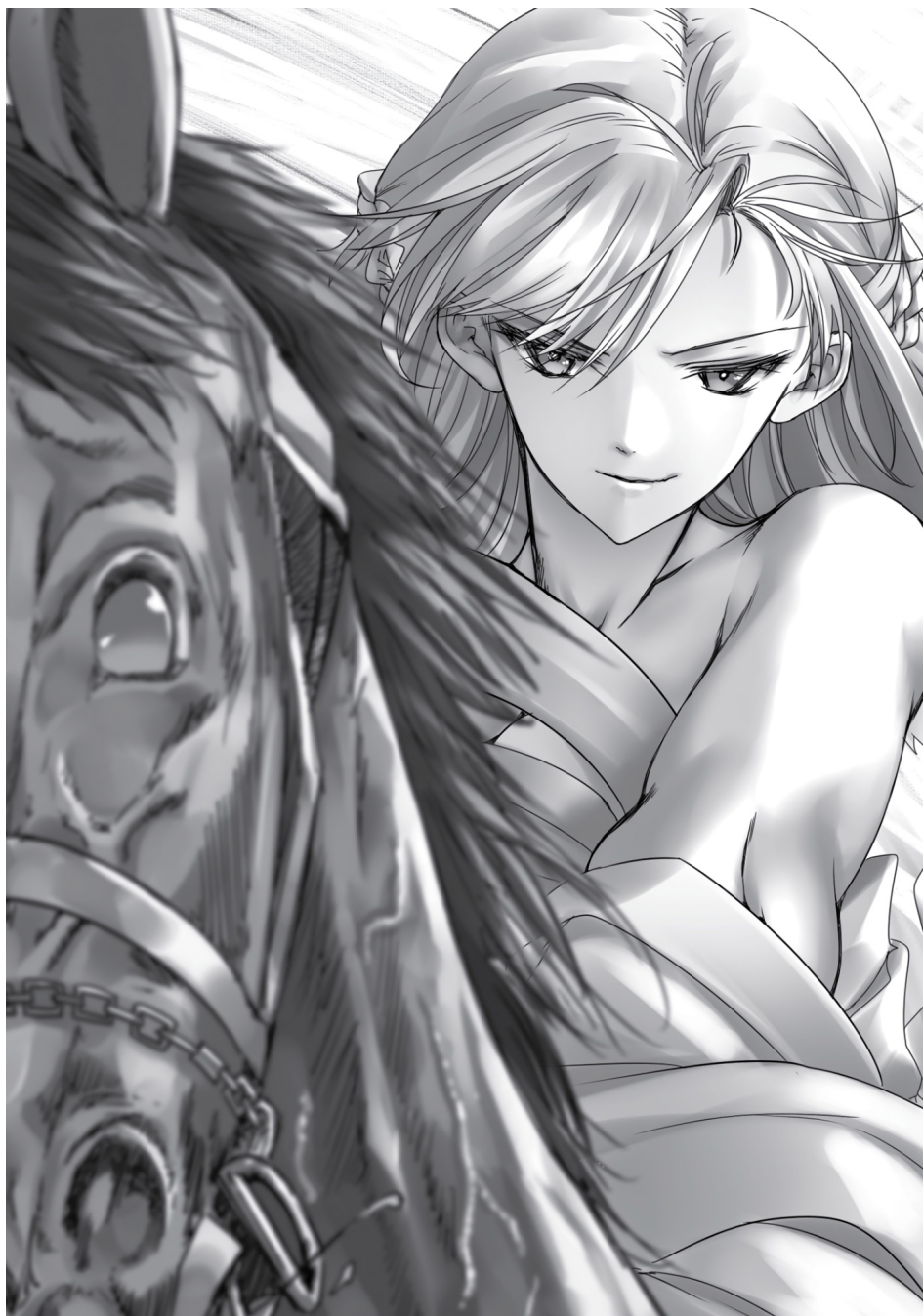
“So I don’t believe this is any kind of teleportation power. This large spike in the number of monsters can only be...” She furrowed her brow, fixing the scroll in her hands with a cold stare. “...newly spawned, right there in the east.”

“Eh? You really mean that?”

“Yes. Based on the past information we have, I can only conclude that is the case. This is something we cannot ignore. And yet... Ah, now I see.”

The dry air around the Goddess dropped to freezing in an instant. On her mouth formed a smile without a single hint of warmth.

“So this is where you make your move, *Demon King*.”



Chapter 2: Change

WHEN I OPENED my eyes, the light streaming through the window told me it was morning.

Or whatever passes for dawn in this strange underground world the Forbidden Witch controls. So she's got her windows set up with a night and day cycle then.

"Good morning."

I turned to see Seras sitting on the edge of the bed, already changed into her everyday clothes. She shifted, turning toward me and putting a hand on the sheets to steady herself.

Seems like she's been waiting there for some time.

"You were waiting for me to wake up?"

"I never get tired of watching you sleep."

"...Cheap way to kill time, I guess." I tentatively touched my left shoulder.

Still have this dull pain. I was hoping my stat modifiers would speed up the healing process, but I guess they aren't that powerful. I'll have to get through this one day at a time.

This pain would really affect me if I had to go out and fight humanoid monsters again. But there's no need to rush back out there—I haven't gotten the information I need on that forbidden magic yet.

I sat up slowly, careful of my shoulder.

"You sleep well, Seras?"

"Yes, Sir Too-ka. Quite soundly indeed."

"We weren't able to get enough rest out there in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, so must feel good, eh?"

Seras ran her hand over the sheets where she'd slept the night. She looked to be debating whether to ask something, or to stay quiet.

Ah, I get it.

"This means we're fine sleeping in the same bed from now on too,

eh?” I said.

Seras’ hand suddenly stopped.

Bingo.

She swept a few strands of hair behind her ear, and looked down at the floor. “Y-yes. There should be no problems. I woke up an hour earlier than you, Sir Too-ka, but I believe I slept well enough. I feel fully refreshed.”

She didn’t spend the whole hour watching me sleep, did she?

I checked the time on my pocket watch.

“I was fine then? Wasn’t snoring, talking in my sleep, anything like that?”

“Not at all. I should ask...after you kindly cast Sleep on me, were there any *problems* after that?”

“I’ve always been surprised by how well you sleep. You don’t turn over or anything.”

I’ve never even heard her snore—only that quiet, regular breathing she always does. She talks sometimes, but not enough to bother me.

Seras placed a hand on her chest in relief. “That is good to hear.”

“Right, then. Can you go meet up with Eve and Lis for breakfast? I’ll be there as soon as I’m ready.”

“Understood.”

Seras left, and I beckoned Piggymaru over to me.

“Squee.” The little slime wobbled closer.

“Did anything happen when we were asleep?”

“Squee.” *Red—negative.*

“All right. I’m glad you’re here, little buddy,” I said, stroking Piggymaru.

“Squee♪”

One big reason I can get a good night’s sleep is because of this little guy. Piggymaru shuts down when it’s under too much stress, but other than that, it doesn’t need any sleep—meaning it can guard our room all night. Like some living security camera with a built-in alarm.

I quickly dressed and left with Piggymaru and Slei in tow.

We haven't decided how long we're going to stay here yet. How I get the information on that forbidden magic all depends on Erika too. It might backfire if I try to rush her. I should wait for her to make her own decision. When we get to leave this place is going to depend on when my injury heals, too. We've got some free time, but I don't intend on spending it lazing around.

“You'd like me to teach you how to ride a horse?” asked Seras.

It was right after breakfast that I came to her with the question. “I asked if you'd teach me once we left Monroy, didn't I? Why not now?”

So finally the time has come, Seras' smile seemed to say.

“Understood. If that is what you wish, Sir. Too-ka.”

“Thanks. You mind helping out too, Slel?”

“Pumpyuun♪” Slel agreed, squealing happily as Lis played with her.

“How's your injury, anyway?”

“Pumpee♪” She lifted her forelegs high in the air just to show she could.

Doesn't look like she's pushing herself for my sake. Her recovery's much faster than mine. Is that a common trait of her species? Seras' skill in first aid probably had something to do with it too.

“She should have no issues with simply walking around in her second stage of transformation,” Seras said.

It's probably fine, then.

I turned to Eve, almost as an afterthought. “I'd actually been meaning to ask you to teach me how to fight in close combat too.”

Eve nodded, wiping food from the corners of her mouth with her thumb. “Sure thing.”

She's already run through the basics with me, but this is a good chance to take some more time to learn.

Erika, who had been enjoying her tea after breakfast, now stood up from her chair.

“On the lowest floor, there is a door—so long as you don't go in there, you can practice wherever you like. Well...within reason, you

understand?”

The golems at her back began hurriedly clearing away our plates.

“Oh, and can I borrow Eve and Lis for a while? You only need her after your horseback riding training, don’t you?”

“Eh? Sure, I don’t mind.”

And so Eve and Lis left with Erika, and Seras and I exited the witch’s house. It was still hard to believe that we were underground. The wind blew, and somehow there were birds flying through the air above our heads. The strange presence which broke the spell, were those huge roots hanging from the clouds and burrowing down into the earth below our feet.

“Right then, first thing first...”

I poured mana into Sleis’s crystal, transforming her into her second stage—the one in which she looked closest to an actual horse. One of Erika’s golems came walking out of the house, holding a complete set of riding gear in its arms.

“Thank you,” said Seras, a little taken aback, as it handed the harness over silently.

I can’t even tell if they understand human language.

“Erika’s being considerate, huh,” I said.

“This gear looks a little old, but it’s good quality. I prepared some handmade items myself just in case, but let’s use these since we have them.”

Seras proceeded to teach me how to attach riding gear to a horse. In her third stage of transformation I hadn’t even needed a saddle—Slei’s body had transformed, perfectly supporting and balancing me on her back.

But I can’t rely on Slei always being by my side. I might have to ride other horses in the future.

“You’re good at this, Sir Too-ka.”

We finished attaching the riding gear together, and with Seras’ help I took to the saddle and found the stirrups with my feet.

Not bad. Comfortable even.

“Then allow me to join you...” Seras gracefully jumped on behind

me. She took one deep breath, and both her hands clasped over mine on the reins. "Let us begin."

"I'm ready."

She began to teach, giving me a lecture on riding as I tried putting her advice directly into practice. She taught me how to hold the reins, how to calm the horse down, and how to kick against the horse's flank to spur them into a gallop.

A one-on-one lesson on horseback riding. She's a really good teacher, too. Is it because she used to be in charge of a band of knights?

"Sir Too-ka, there is something I'd like you to be mindful of," she said, bringing her body in closer to mine after I felt like I'd just gotten the hang of something she was teaching me. She lowered her voice, almost whispering in my ear. "Slei-dono does have a tendency of reading your intentions and acting accordingly. Please keep in mind that handling other horses will not be quite so easy."

Figures. I had a feeling this was too good to be true.

"She's still such a young horse, and so it's likely that she's being considerate, as she views you as a parent figure, Sir Too-ka."

I stroked Slei's mane. "I think you're right."

"Pakyuun♪"

"Seeing that third stage of transformation, I forget sometimes. You're still just a kid, aren't you."

After practice, we took off Slei's riding gear.

"Hmm?"

Seras looked toward the house. I followed her line of sight to see Eve and Lis walking toward us. They had changed clothes, and Erika was coming up behind them.

"You get those from her?" I asked.

Eve nodded. "Erika's idea—a considerate one. She said we wouldn't be able to relax in our traveling clothes."

"What? Not complaining, are you?" chimed in Erika, sounding a little indignant.

"Those clothes are a bit...revealing, don't you think?" I asked.

“Personally, I’d rather you called them *liberating*,” replied Erika.

They looked similar to the clothes that Erika herself wore—like Chinese dresses, decorated in a western style.

Still, I can’t say Eve and Lis don’t suit them.

“I couldn’t help it. In any case, their clothes are being washed and dried right now. And I only make clothes I want to wear myself. Elves like to be lightly dressed like this, you know? The opinion of humans is no concern of mine. Strictly speaking I believe it might have something to do with our culture of the spirits.”

I guess Seras wears liberating clothes as well.

Eve and Lis looked down at their new attire.

“I don’t mind them myself,” said Eve.

“They are, ehm...easier to move around in,” said Lis.

Erika gave me a piercing gaze, like she was looking right through me.

“Whatcha think?” her eyes seemed to ask.

Makes it harder to read her emotions when she never smiles.

I finished taking off Sleis riding gear and sighed.

“So long as you two like the clothes, I guess it doesn’t matter that you were forced into them.”

“I like a man who’s understanding, you know?” said Erika.

“...”

“What?”

“You spent so much time making those clothes, you just wanted someone else to wear them, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Is there anything wrong with that?” Erika asked in response.

“Not really.”

Erika gasped. “Come to think of it, I’m not here to ask you about clothes! I have a present for Eve, and I wanted to show you all.”

Then a shadow fell across her face, and she shook her head sadly. “Though it’s a terrible thing that I won’t get to make many more of these.”

“You mean this gift is something you used to make for the

leopardman clans?”

“Yes.” Erika handed Eve a silver colored bracelet. There were three round indentations in it, fitted with black crystals that had the numbers 1, 2 and 3 carved into them.

“Hmm, an accessory?” As Eve inspected the bracelet and placed it on her wrist, Erika poked me in the side with her elbow.

“Too-ka, try pouring some mana into that ‘3’ button will you? You’ve got more power in generating mana than ol’ Erika does,” she said.

Some kind of magical item to enhance Eve’s strength, maybe?

“...All right. Here goes, Eve.” I began to pour.

“H-hmph. Erika. I can feel something thin creeping into my arm from inside this thing.”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt you.”

“...I trust you.”

The pale blue light from my arm poured into the black crystal, filling it up from the bottom.

“Seems like this thing needs quite a bit of mana,” I noted.

“Worth it,” said Erika confidently.

That confidence... So she’s done this before. I guess that puts my mind at ease—this isn’t some kind of experiment.

“Uh, what?!” Eve exclaimed as her body was suddenly enveloped in a creamy light. Thick and viscous, it wobbled and shook...and in a moment, it was gone.

“Eh? Big sis!?” Lis was the first to speak.

Seras looked shocked as well. “This is...”

Eve stared down at her hands in disbelief.

“Seems like it worked. These are special bracelets that I made for Eidimm and the others. For all the members of the Speed Clan.” said Erika, looking at the newly transformed Eve. “They can make you appear as a human.”

Lis’ eyes were sparkling, gasps of amazement still escaping her lips. “Big sis, you’re beautiful...!”

Soft, chestnut brown hair flowed down to her waist. Her eyes were the same jade color they'd always been, but were now framed by thin, sharp eyebrows. Her almond-shaped eyes betrayed a strong will, but not cheek or arrogance.

Maybe that's because of how grounded her personality is to begin with.

Her new appearance fit the calm, composed Eve that I knew already.

Looking closer, you can really tell that that's her under there. She looks great, too. Eve was slender to begin with, and had a well-toned body. I could see the beauty in her face even when she was a leopardman.

Eve touched her arms curiously.

"I've touched the skin of furless humans before, but it feels strange to have become one myself. Awkward, or rather...I understand now why you humans want to wear more clothes than us leopardmen," she said, reaching up to her face to touch the hair that had fallen over her cheeks, stroking it softly and gently. "Hmm, touching my hair like this...it's not a bad sensation. I do think it will get in the way a little during battle."

Eve turned her head, and raised her buttocks in the air. "I'll feel off balance with no tail, too. Like something is missing."

She continued to inspect her new body. Sleir circled her, keeping her distance as she did so. Before long, she drew closer and began to sniff.

"Kyuuuh *Sniff, sniff*... Pakyuh?! Pakyuhn."

"Mh? You've realized it's me by my scent, Sleir?"

So Eve still smells the same, huh.

Erika came to stand beside me. "Seems the transformation was a success," she said.

"Looks that way, yeah."

Erika pushed up her breasts with both hands. "Tch, even her chest is bigger now... Never mind Seras, now I can't even compete with Eve!"

"You said you made these for the Speed Clan, didn't you?"

"I did, yes. What of it?"

"Minorities like the leopardmen are at risk of being wiped out by

humans. I saw the way they were treated in the city of Monroy. Is that why you made these bracelets? So that leopardmen could live alongside humans?"

Erika placed a hand on her hip and twisted it forward, looking over at Eve with an almost sentimental look in her eyes. "Eidimm... Eve's parents were strong and good. But they had too much hope, too much optimism when it came to humans. I loved them both, but their good hearts always worried me."

The good are always the first to be eaten alive—my real parents taught me that life lesson early on.

"So Eve's good streak comes from her parents, then."

"I imagine so. Edimm and the others allowed me to stay with them and offered me food. For more than a few nights, I might add."

"They didn't care that you were of a different species."

Makes sense that Erika would owe them her gratitude, too.

"Did you give the bracelet to Eve now because of what I said this morning about us training together?"

"Good chance for her to get used to handling weapons in her human form, isn't it? I'm sure she'll feel a little different fighting as a human."

"I suppose that's why you made her change clothes, too."

"Made it much easier to see the changes in her body, didn't it? Much more noticeable that she's missing a tail in that dress."

So those revealing clothes were... Hey, hold on a minute.

"But Lis too?"

"What about her?"

"Why did she have to get changed as well?"

Erika glared at me, clearly upset. "I told you already. I wanted to dress her up. I also just wanted to dress up Eve to some extent. What's wrong with that?"

"And I already told you—I don't mind as long as they don't."

"Hmmm," Erika pouted at me. "Lis, do you like those clothes?"

"O-of course..." replied Lis, flustered by Erika's question. "I love all the clothes that Mr. Too-ka and Miss Erika have given me..."

Does kinda feel like she's being forced into saying it.

Erika looked back to Eve, brushing her hair behind her head.

"Anyway, now Eve can return to your human countries without being found out, can't she?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Eve walked closer to Erika—she looked to have suddenly realized something. "Erika, this transformation...can I turn back to normal? It seems convenient, but being like this forever might not be so great."

"Ridiculous. Did you think I, Erika Anaorbael, wouldn't have thought of that?"

Relief spread across Eve's face.

"When I made those things, of course, I ensured they were revocable," said Erika, tracing her fingers along the back of Eve's neck.

"Revocable?" Eve turned her head to the side.

First time I've seen her do that in her human form. It comes across a little different.

"It just means you can turn back, Eve," I said.

"I see."

"There'd be no point in a transformation that couldn't be reversed would there? Pour the same amount of mana into the 'number 1 crystal' and you'll turn back."

"Mind if I ask how long this effect lasts?"

"There's no limit. You won't return to normal until you pour enough mana into that crystal. Well, I imagine it's difficult to squeeze that much mana out under normal circumstances though."

But with my MP reserves, that's not a problem.

Eve tried winding up her arm, stretching it as if testing its strength.

"I don't feel like my movements or muscles have changed much... My hair and chest might get in the way of fighting a bit now, but I'm sure it won't be a problem."

"Want to use these then? Might be better if you tie it up?" said Erika, stepping behind her. Eve looked a little nervous, but relented as Erika quickly began tying up her hair with two white ribbons. When it

was done, Eve softly patted both sides of her head.

“Hmph... Like two great big ears. Not bad.”

Twintails, huh.

“Suits you more than I thought it would,” said Erika, inspecting her.

“How much of her strength can she retain in this form?” I asked.

“Over 90 percent at least—I did my best to get that number as high as possible. Do expect to be a little weaker.”

“No, this is more than enough,” said Eve, still inspecting her muscles. “Now I can continue to be of use to Too-ka, rather than being bound to a life on the run as a leopardman. Thank you, Erika.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, just be mindful of how much mana it takes to transform yourself, okay?”

“Without Too-ka at my side I cannot use this bracelet lightly... What is this ‘number 2 crystal’ for by the way?”

“Ah, that? Just a by-product of the process. Try it out.”

There was something pompous in the way Erika said it—not to mention the wicked look in her eyes.

Well... Given Eve’s tendencies, she’d want to try it out no matter what.

“All right, then, Eve, let’s do this.” I poured mana into the second crystal, and Eve began to glow again, consumed by the wobbling light. “I see, so that’s what it does.”

Only Eve’s ears, tail, and limbs were those of a leopardman.

I guess the number 2 crystal makes her a catgirl, huh.

“H-hmm, what do you think of this, Too-ka?” asked Eve, looking over at me with a complicated, tense expression on her face.



“...Doesn’t look like we’ll need number 2 any time soon,” I answered.

Eve sighed in relief.

She’s relieved because I agreed with her? To be honest, I can’t think of any way that second button would be useful.

“Now, look,” Erika had her arms folded, clearly displeased. “Aren’t any of you able to appreciate something *purely* for its aesthetics?”

“Big Sis...you *are* kinda cute.”

“I don’t mind this look either.” said Seras.

At least somebody seems to like it. Might be useful in the future, to stop Eve from scaring any little kids we come across.

For several days after that I did combat training with Seras and Eve. Seras taught me mostly how to counter swords and arrows which came at me, and Eve handled the other weapon types.

The witch’s house had all kinds of weapons in its storehouse—the majority of which had been gathered from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters on her doorstep. Many runaways entered the forest as a last resort, just as Eve had. Now only their tools and weapons remained. The witch’s familiars and golems went out periodically and gathered their fallen items.

“I only take the useful ones, of course. My house isn’t infinitely large, you know,” said Erika.

Sure, but this place is way more spacious than I expected at first. The storehouse she showed me was huge too.

“As expected, I have to say you have a long way to go with regards to combat experience, Too-ka.”

This isn’t something you pick up overnight—there’s far more to remember than there is with horseback riding. But I do have some highly skilled teachers, that’s for sure. The Princess Knight, former Captain of the Band of the Holy Knights, and the strongest bloodsport warrior in Monroy. They’ve been training me personally this whole time. I couldn’t ask for more.

At first Eve didn’t seem used to her human form, but living up to her name, her movements were just as dazzling as they’d been before

after just half a day of practice.

“It doesn’t feel so bad working out as a human,” she said, and she seemed to be enjoying it.

I also continued my horseback riding practice with Seras.

“Whoa! Like that, Seras?”

“Yes, very good.”

Seras no longer needed to ride in the saddle with me during our lessons.

“I don’t think there is much else I can teach you about horseback riding for the time being,” she said, looking somewhat remorseful.

“I don’t know about that.” I said, stroking Slei’s mane. “I might need your help again in the future when it comes to riding other horses. Slei’s too easy to ride—she’s way too good at this.”

Seras smirked at me.

“It might motivate you more if she were a little tougher to deal with.”

“You like the mischievous type of children then, Miss Princess Knight?”

“So long as they aren’t so mischievous that I can’t handle them.”

“You do look like you’d be better at dealing with the well-behaved children.”

“I can be strict when I have to be. I could hardly have been Captain of the Band of the Holy Knights back in Neah with only smiles and kind words. I simply haven’t had any reason to be strict with you or scold you, Sir Too-ka...”

“I guess Eve and Lis never do anything you’d need to really shout at them for either.”

At dinner time I regularly used the leather pouch, and Erika watched closely to try to figure out how it worked.

“It’s similar to the skills of the heroes from another world. I don’t believe a similar power could be possessed by the magical items in this world,” she said, furrowing her brow in disappointment.

She'd fallen in love with the food and drinks the pouch provided, especially a bottle of brandy that came out one day. It was cognac—a brand so famous even I knew the name.

“I will treasure it,” she said, happily pushing her hands against her cheeks (but not smiling, as usual).

I don't drink, so I'm just glad it didn't have to go to waste. Still, that uniquely shaped bottle...it almost looks more at home in this world than in ours.

On one day in particular, Seras and Eve taught me how to parry with my shortsword.

“Like this?”

“No, more like this.”

This is pretty difficult.

“Like this, then. If they come at you from this direction you have to redirect it like this.” Eve stood behind me, gripping my arms and moving them into place, teaching me one-on-one on how to move my hands and feet.

“I understand the theory, but actually pulling off the movements is hard, huh.”

“The strength of the shortsword is in close-combat, and the advantage is that it's easy to move around with. But that means the blade's surface area is smaller, too. In wide open spaces against opponents with longer blades, you'll have to rely on your reflexes and your eye for spotting small movements. You just have to train too. Get it in your muscle memory. If someone does end up lunging at you, a shortsword's probably going to give you the advantage in any case.”

“So it's important to understand the strengths of each individual weapon?” I asked.

“That's right. Heh heh! You're a good student.” Eve folded her arms and smiled, impressed. “Even when things aren't going your way, you don't give up. You just press on.”

“I'm good at forcing myself to carry on.”

“But you shouldn't try too hard. You're a man who takes on our burdens to reduce the load on us. But doing that can wear you down on

the inside. You need to find a way to relax too.”

“I know how important it is to take breaks... I can just never really relax until I’ve finished doing what I’ve started.”

“But if you don’t properly rest, you won’t have the strength to finish, will you?”

“You make a good point.”

Eve insisted that I sit down on a wooden bench nearby our training area. She then knelt in front of me and put her hands on my thighs, squeezing them as if she was trying to figure something out.

“This doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“...Not *that* much, no.”

“It’s good to be passionate about your training, but you’ve been giving it too much recently. You should loosen up some more.”

“So this is my rest?”

“Hah! This’ll do you good every once in a while. Oh, hey, Seras. You here to help out?”

Seras walked over to us with a cup of drinking water—she had just finished taking a break of her own.

“Don’t tell me, has Sir Too-ka injured his leg?” she asked.

“Don’t worry. I’m just getting the tension out of his muscles after our training. Why don’t you do his arms?”

“Understood.”

Seras put down her silver cup on the bench and sat down next to me.

“Shall I...?”

“Hmph. If you take care of that, I’ll take care of his lower body.”

Seras and Eve continued to massage my arms and legs for a while longer.

“Now drink some water, Too-ka,” insisted Eve, holding the cup to my lips.

“Come on, It’s not like I can’t use my hands.”

“Relax, Too-ka. We both owe you a lot. Especially after what you did for us in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Let us return the

favor.”

“So that’s what this is about, huh.”

Eve raised her eyebrows, then looked down at the ground remorsefully. “I’m so heavy-handed, this is all I could think to do...”

She raised her head, suddenly smiling up at me. “Or would you rather Seras gave you the drink?”

Eve shot Seras a meaningful glance.

“No, well, I... If that’s what Sir Too-ka desires, then of course I will.” She looked away in embarrassment, sweeping the hair away from her face.

After having my arms and legs massaged for a while, I felt a strange, complete sense of contentment wash over me.

Right, then—now my break is over, I can start training again.

Lis, Slel, and Piggymaru were off on a walk together where it was safe. So, Seras and Eve took turns instructing me—doing an outstanding job as always.

I feel like I’m getting better little by little, honing my skills. I can feel it in my bones. But wait, do these two really feel like they owe me?

...Tch.

I gave a short, exasperated sigh and kept going.

They don’t need to give me massages or anything. They’ve already paid me back by training me.

After my training was over, I returned to the house, leaving Seras and Eve still practicing outside.

“Too-ka, how’s it goin’?” Erika greeted me in high spirits, delicately raising herself from the bench she’d been reclining on. The room smelled faintly of alcohol and there was a silver cup next to the cognac bottle by her side.

That bottle... That’s the brandy I gave her, isn’t it? She’s already gone through quite a bit of it. Isn’t that stuff supposed to be strong?

“Seems you like the drink,” I said.

“It’s so good! What is this stuff anyway? Brandeh, right?” she slurred.

She closed her eyes lovingly and lightly brushed her cheek against the surface of the bottle.

“I just thought I’d have a sip... Then before I knew it, I’d had two, and then three. And I don’t drink that often, but...now ol’ Erika might be a little drunk.”

A little?

“Uhhnh...I wanna sleep in my own bed.” She pushed up off the bench, using both hands to steady herself.

Doesn’t look so steady on her feet though. Jeez.

“I know it tastes good, but you shouldn’t drink too much.” I lent her my shoulder for support.

To be honest, I don’t like drunks. They remind me too much of my real parents.

Erika’s head drooped down to her chest.

She’s pretty out of it. Must’ve been drinking that stuff like it was beer. Well, she’ll have to sleep it off now, I guess.

“Jeez, you’re hammered. I’ll take you to your room. Er, so...where is it?”

Erika silently raised an arm, directing me where to go.

“Gotcha.”

I’m at fault too I guess, for not warning her how strong cognac is. I would ask a golem to help carry her but they only move on her orders. It’s going to have to be me.

Erika’s room was completely purple, and very cluttered. The decorations weren’t exactly extravagant, but there was a canopy bed in the center of the room.

I should put her down to sleep there.

But when I went to lead her into bed, Erika’s legs tangled beneath her and she fell toward me.

“Oof!” Normally I would’ve been able to support her weight, but after a long day of training my arms buckled. “I knew this would happen...”

I lay face up on the bed with Erika on top, clinging to me.

This wouldn’t look good if someone walked in right about now.

Erika slowly lifted her face, which was buried in my chest and mumbled, “Shorry.” Looking down at me with sleepy eyes, her cheeks flushed.

“Pace yourself next time, okay?”

“Sure... You mind if I get some sleep?”

I lifted Erika off me and tucked her into the sheets.

“*Haah*... Thanks.”

“Want some water?”

“Just one cup.”

“All right, then, I’ll go get it.”

“Too-ka.”

Erika called my name as I made to leave the room.

“Eh?”

She gave me a thumbs-up as she splayed out on the bed.

“I know you’ve got your reasons for doing this, but...your kindness is making me like you even more.”

“Maybe I should be thanking the brandy then.”

“Minus ten points for that one...”

“Hmph, I don’t mind. This isn’t me trying to get you to like me.”

I left the room.

Even when she’s drunk—that witch never smiles.

SERAS ASHRAIN

“**L**OOKS LIKE I caused quite a bit of trouble for Too-ka.”

Seras, Eve, and Lis had been relaxing in Erika’s bath when the witch came to join them. Her bath was spacious, more than large enough for four people to wash themselves at once.

“I never expected I’d have visitors—I don’t know why I made the baths so big,” Erika had said as she washed her face. She had then proceeded to tell them about the events of last night and the perils of

drinking too much cognac. And how Too-ka then helped her into bed.

“Hmm...” growled Eve, still in her human form. “So that’s what happened when Seras and I were training.”

“It was a mistake on my part. When I do drink, I never usually go that far...” Erika’s voice trailed off and she splashed about in the water with her long legs. The bath was the perfect temperature—so comfortable that one could completely lose track of time as they relaxed.

“So anyway, are you used to your new human body now, Eve?” asked Erika

“My skin’s so soft now... I still can’t shake that weird feeling, and I’m not used to missing my tail either,” Eve answered, scooping up some water with her hands.

“What about in combat?”

“I might be getting used to that. It’s starting to come back to me, all thanks to Seras for agreeing to cross swords with me.”

“I’m honored to be of help to you, Eve,” said Seras.

“Still...” Erika sank into the warm water up to her shoulders, placing her elbows on the rounded edge of the bath. “All three of you are so—how should I put this—admirable! If I were a man, I wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off you. You all look spectacular.”

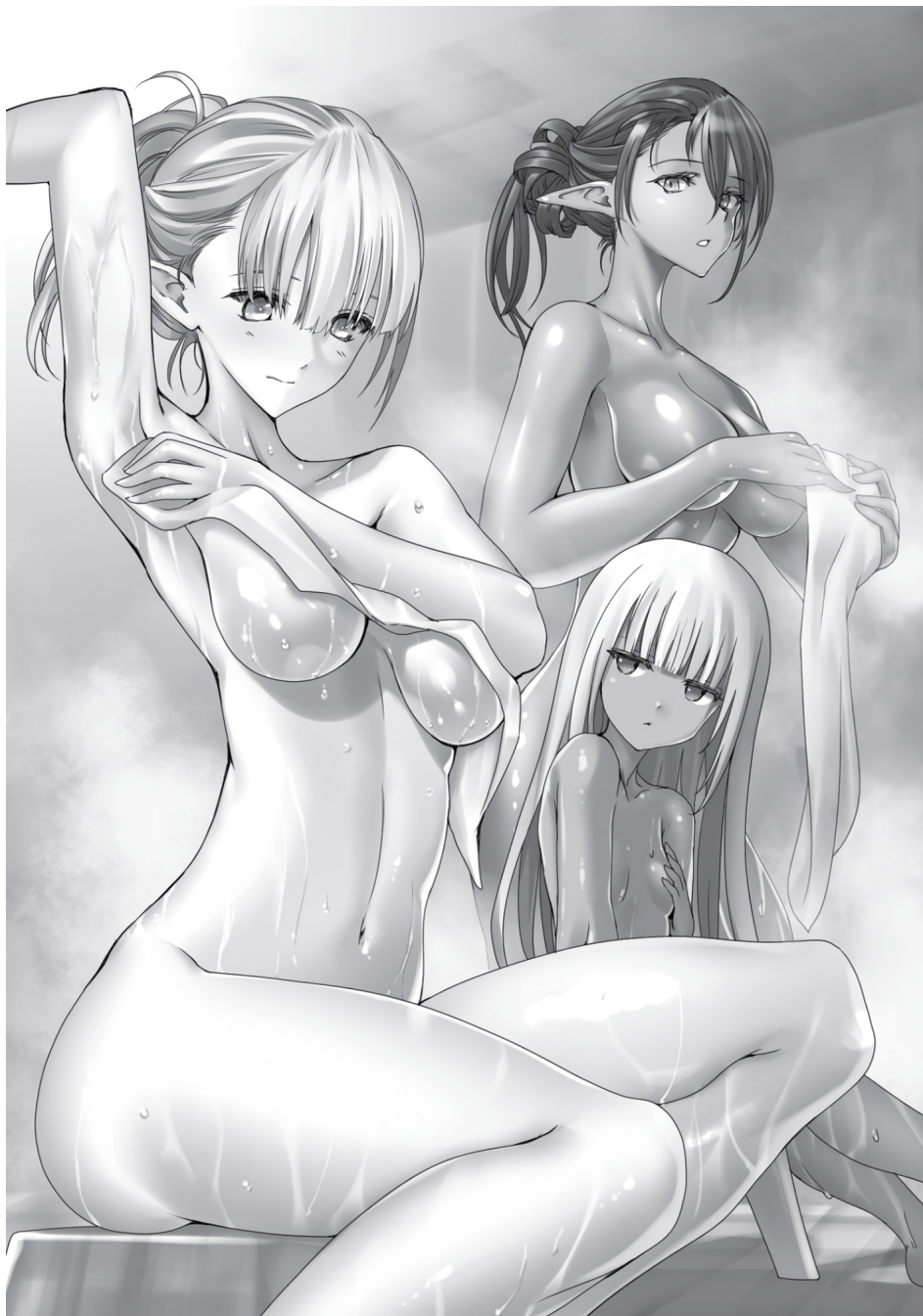
“I have a hard time thinking of myself as beautiful,” said Eve.

“But you are! Your breasts are even bigger than mine and Seras’!”

Eve pushed up her breasts with her hands.

“The more I have up here, the less effective I am in battle—even though I know that human males have a preference for large breasts.”

Lis giggled. “You’re still just as beautiful as you used to be, Big Sis.”



Eve smiled and put a hand on Lis' head.

“Hmph, if you say so Lis, it must be so. But when I'm with Too-ka, I don't feel that he thinks of me as a woman or looks at me in that way at all.”

Erika looked toward the entrance of the bath.

“You might be right... I don't think it's because he's dim or anything.”

From my perspective, Erika and Eve are both completely captivating women. Erika seems almost closer to Too-ka than me, now. Why is that, I wonder? When she told him she liked him, I was so taken aback, I even dropped that cup.

But Sir Too-ka isn't mine. He can like whoever he wants to, and I have no right to complain. Seras sat soaking in the water, hugging her knees. Even so, I should at least allow myself to think of him. To feel the way that I do.

When she returned to the room it was somewhat late, and Too-ka was already asleep.

We sparred together so much today, even he must be exhausted. But that just shows how committed he is to his combat training. His status effect skills are so powerful, but he never stops trying to improve.

Seras laid a hand on the sheets and smiled down at the sleeping Too-ka.

“You've gotten good at horseback riding, too,” she said quietly, sliding into bed beside him. His face was defenseless—exposed.

These are the only times he looks his age. That's the real Too-ka. How hard he must struggle to create his mask.

“Please, don't worry. I will do whatever I can to support you,” she whispered, a warm feeling spreading through her chest, and a smile on her lips.

Sir Too-ka...

Seras suddenly caught a hold of herself. She placed a hand on her forehead and sighed in disappointment.

I can't. If I stare at him too long, I'll want to place my lips on his again. It seems I'm unable to control my feelings lately. I should go to sleep...

Seras lay down on her side and closed her eyes.

MIMORI TOUKA

ONE WEEK LATER.

“Is that all you ever read?” asked the witch, sneaking a look at my *Forbidden Arts: Complete Works* from behind my back. I was reading alone in my room as Seras and Eve trained outside.

Apparently, your senses can dull if you don't swing your sword every day.

Lis and Slel were off together somewhere too. The only other person in the room was Piggymaru, wobbling about next to me.

“Is that the picture book you found in the Ruins of Disposal?” she asked, placing two hands on my shoulders and leaning in to get a better look.

“Picture book? Well, I guess it has diagrams, yeah. I just flip through it in my free time.”

“Some disposed-of hero used to own it, right? Mind if I take a look?”

I closed the book and handed it back up over my shoulder without turning my head.

“Oh, so you don't mind then?” she asked.

“I trust you now.”

It'd also be good to know how much this thing is actually worth. And how will she react to the devices the Great Sage came up with?

“Then allow me,” said Erika, moving to sit cross-legged on the floor and silently scanning the pages of the book, her long fingers following the words and turning each page.

“I'm surprised. If that dead hero hadn't brought this book into the Ruins of Disposal as they did, the world might be very different now,” said Erika, turning in place to face me. I watched as she continued grappling with the book, until she stopped again and looked up at me.

“Hey Too-ka, you don't know the name of the hero who had this

thing, do you?”

“The Great Sage, Anglin Bathard. Also known as the Anglin, Hero of Darkness.”

“I know that name... Never met him though. He was supposed to have stayed here in this world for a time after defeating the source of all evil, then returned to his own world along with his friends... But I see he was sent down into the ruins, instead.

“Wait a sec. You didn’t mention finding this sage’s remains when you first told me your story, did you?” she asked.

“It would’ve been a problem for me if you had some weird connection to him. I wasn’t sure that you weren’t working for the Goddess yourself. There was a chance you’d take my copy of the book and burn it the first time you heard his name.”

Erika covered her mouth with her hand, and shot a wounded look in my direction. “I’d *never* do something like that.”

She looked back down to the book and flipped some more. “Huh? What’s this?!”

Must’ve seen those letters written in blood.

Erika read the page quickly—her expression showed she understood immediately.

“I see. So the Great Sage and his friends couldn’t best the Soul Eater.”

“I’m sure they weren’t in their best form. I bet that foul Goddess must’ve taken away some of their power before she sent them down there. She wasn’t taking any chances. But I think she took a very big chance when she disposed of you. Ended up killing the Soul Eater, didn’t you?”

I was sent down there as I was, a helpless, clueless, and worthless rock-bottom hero.

The witch’s bluish-purple eyes fixed on Piggymaru beside me. “Ahhh, now I see. That slime is different because it’s been enhanced by the techniques you found in this book.”

Erika studied the page about monster enhancement solution.

“I think the Great Sage was able to do all these experiments because of his hero skills. He was able to dispel poisons I think, so none

of the monsters he used in his tests needed to die. These notes in the margins are so useful...”

“So even you think this book’s worth a read?”

“There are things here that not even I have been able to attempt. That’s why I think these experiments were only possible because of his unique skills as a hero.”

I guess this technology was way ahead of its time—makes sense why the Great Sage called them Forbidden Arts. He must’ve thought it was too soon for humanity to have technology like this. Well, I bet the Goddess getting her hands on it is what he was most afraid of.

Erika sat there reading, mumbling to herself for a while.

“What’s this stuff up on the bed?” she asked suddenly, lifting her chin up to see.

“These are all materials for making forbidden devices. I’ve already finished the voice-change and voice-amplifying crystals. I have materials for some other things, but I’m prioritizing making that monster enhancement solution for Piggymaru before any of that.”

“Hmm...” Erika stood and came to sit on the edge of the bed, crossing her legs and leaning over a little to look at the materials on the bed.

“I only need one more thing to make the solution for Piggymaru’s second enhancement level.”

“Hey, Too-ka,” Erika sat up straight with the book in her lap, pointing at one of the drawings. “Is this the thing you need?”

“Yeah. Any idea where I might get one of those?” I asked, hoping she might know where that monster lived.

“I’ve got one.”

“Really?”

Erika tapped the drawing on the page lightly with her fingertips. “I’m telling you, I’ve got one of these in the basement.”

In the witch’s house, there was one door that she’d instructed us never to open. I stood before that door now, with Erika at my side.

“You’re saying I can go inside?”

“Well, I suppose I can trust you with this much.”

“So she says, Piggymaru.”

“Squee.”

“Right, let’s go.”

Through the door there was a shaft leading downward, further into the earth. We descended by ladder until Erika’s feet touched softly on the ground below. The room at the bottom was filled with shelves, desks, and all kinds of tools that looked like they were for experiments. I even saw the standard bubbling mystery liquid that no lab can do without.

“So...this is a witch’s research lab, I take it?”

Erika’s workshop down here is about as big as a home economics classroom. And it’s much hotter than up on the surface. Not so much that it’s unbearable, but enough to make you sweat.

I saw several doors that looked like they led to other rooms. Erika pointed to one of them on our right.

“This way.”

I followed Erika into a room filled with shelves, all of which looked to be handmade. They were crammed full of bottles and jars containing monster parts suspended in formaldehyde.

“Must be hard keeping all these so well preserved.”

“This room has to be kept at a certain temperature and it makes the whole place hot. *Phew...* It’s boiling in here!” Erika wiped the sweat from her cheek. Her clothing was light, but sweat still dripped from her tanned skin.

“I imagined it’d be the opposite—shouldn’t things be preserved in the cold?”

But it makes sense that she dresses like that, if she has to work in here all day.

“Squ...”

Piggymaru seems tired by it too... Poor little guy looks like a soggy dumpling.

“Wait there a sec, will you?” Erika stood on her tiptoes, stretching up to look through the bottles on an upper shelf.

Apparently, even she doesn't know where everything is.

"If you're going through all this trouble to preserve it, this stuff must be important, right?"

"Of course it is."

"So what do you want in exchange?"

"Nothing, really, you can just have it."

"...No strings attached?"

"Think of it as thanks for the brandy."

So that's why? I didn't expect much, but it really ended up being worth my while giving her that bottle. But maybe she might've given me this monster part for free, no matter what.

Erika stopped in front of one particular shelf. She sighed, folded her arms, and stared upward at the bottles.

"Too-ka, give me a lift."

I lifted her up on my shoulders as requested. She was lighter than I thought she'd be.

"You okay up there?"

"Yes, thanks. Sorry I'm so sweaty, but you're not much better yourself. Bear with me, will you?"

"Sure. I can deal with it."

Erika placed a hand on the edge of the shelf and peeked up at it.

"I appreciate the help this time, but make sure you don't become too much of a pushover. Ah! Here it is."

I crouched down to let her off. In her hands was a bottle roughly the size of a human head.

"Here, this is it right?"

She said, holding it out toward me. I checked the bottle's contents.

"Yeah! This is the one."

"Why don't you brew the solution down here? I can lend you the tools. I'm interested in this too."

And so, we set about making the potion. The lab had all the right equipment for it—it was perfect. I returned to my room to get the rest of the ingredients, then rejoined Erika downstairs.

“Let’s get started then.”

With Erika’s help, brewing the monster enhancement solution was a breeze. When it was done, she motioned toward a door with her thumb. “If you’re going to give Piggymaru this stuff now, let’s use that room. It’s a bit hot in here.”

Erika led me into a spacious and sturdy room she said was used for testing the effects of powerful magical devices. The cool air hit me like walking into an air-conditioned store on a hot day.

“Let’s do this. You ready, Piggymaru?”

“Squee! Squee! Squee!” The little slime was sending out its tentacles left and right in rhythm, almost like it was shadow boxing, training for a fight.

Good to see Piggymaru’s excited about this too.

I followed the instructions, pouring the solution into Piggymaru.

“Squee...? Squ-qu-qu?” The slime began to glow with a faint white light, then it grew in size. “Squee?! Squee!”

Erika looked up at the slime, which had now expanded so much it bumped up against the ceiling.

“That Great Sage... This is incredible.”

Piggymaru was huge. “Squ!”

The little guy might be massive now, but its voice is as cute as ever.

“Piggymaru? Try turning back to your regular size for me, will you?”

“Sque? Squ!” Piggymaru slowly deflated, like a balloon letting out air. After a while the slime was back to its normal size, as if nothing had even happened.

Erika looked impressed.

“So when it gets smaller, it’s increasing its density... I see.”

“Personally I think this enhancement could really improve Piggymaru’s abilities in combat. It’s a pretty simple way of making the little guy stronger, I guess.” But that simplicity can be used in a whole range of different ways.

“It seems you already have a few ideas on how to use this new ability?” asked Erika, looking over as if she saw right through me. I

crouched down and patted Piggymaru.

“Not sure if it’s going to work though,” I admitted.

The Forbidden Arts: Complete Works *isn’t nearly as complete as I wish it was. What’s possible, and what isn’t. How far I can push this. I need to find those things out first. But well, for the time being...*

“This’ll definitely expand what Piggymaru’s capable of in a fight. It’ll take some more testing, though.”

“I’m parched!” said Erika, exhausted. I suggested that I stay behind to do more experiments, but she shut me down. “I won’t allow anyone down here unless I’m with them.”

Well, I can understand why she’d be stubborn about that.

I returned upstairs with Erika to a terrace area fitted with a handrail which protruded out from a tunnel carved into the great tree. I leaned against the rail, Piggymaru on my shoulder.

“Looks like they’re still at it out there.”

I could see Seras and Eve fighting a short distance away. Lis was sleeping peacefully—leaning on Sleil, who was also napping. Erika walked up behind me, two silver cups in her hands.

“How’s your injury anyway, Too-ka?”

“Getting better. Few more days and it should stop bothering me so much in training too.”

Erika followed my line of sight.

“Eve and Lis seem to have gotten used to this place,” she noted.

“It’s a good sign, especially for Lis. It’s really calming all the nerves and fears she’d built up before she came here.”

“She’s a good kid.”

“Yeah.”

Erika leaned back on the handrail. “Fine.”

“Eh?”

“I’ll look after her for you.”

“...Thanks.”

Lis just wants a life of peace and quiet, not to get strung along on some journey of revenge.

I took the silver cup that Erika offered.

“So I take it since you’re asking about my injury, you want to know when we’re planning to leave?”

“You’re so sharp, it’s truly infuriating sometimes. But yes, I do.”

Erika looked down at my reflection in the silver cup she held in her hands. She gently poked at the surface of the liquid with her fingertip.

“Hey. If I didn’t give you the forbidden magic, what would you do without it?”

Without hesitation, I answered, “I’d find another way to crush that freakin’ Goddess into dust.”

“...”

Two days passed, and my injury healed considerably.

Much faster than expected, probably due to Seras’ skilled first aid. Might’ve been advantageous if this took a little longer to heal though, given our objective here.

At dinner, we all ate as if we were completely at home in our new surroundings. We’d already finished the better part of our meal when Erika began to speak, as if making casual conversation.

“Oh, did I mention I’ve heard from one of my familiars? Apparently, the Demon Empire has started really coming south in earnest now. They’re saying it’s going to be quite the battle compared to previous generations. The Sacred Alliance is coming out in force to meet them, too. They’ve already got those heroes from another world stationed in armies all across the front.”

The Takao Sisters and Kashima Kobato. Eve saw those three in the forest, but that’s all the recent information I have about 2-C’s movements. That’s all second-hand too, I haven’t actually seen any of them directly.

“Bakoss was in trouble after they lost their Elite Five, but it looks as if they’ve sent out a new *Elite Three* squad of generals. With the main force behind Black Dragon Knights gone, they must be dying to show Vicius they can still be useful in a fight. This is a chance for all the nations to show their worth.”

“I see, so Bakoss is on the move...” mused Seras.

Bakoss are the ones who invaded Neah back when Seras was still living there. She must have her own opinions about them.

“And...there’s another country making a comeback, even if it is in name only.” Erika wiped her mouth with a napkin. “The First Queen of the Holy Empire of Neah, Cattlea Straumss is leading a sortie into battle.”

Seras straightened her back and put down her spoon. “No matter what happens, she doesn’t stay down.” she said, smiling and looking over at Erika.

“I even hear rumors that based on their performance in this battle that they could win their country back.”

“Their country?” Eve growled. “Without the Elite Five, Bakoss is weak, but how could Neah convince them to agree to that?”

“Probably that foul Goddess that brought up the idea,” I cut in.

Erika placed a hand on her cheek, and her elbow on the table. “Bingo. A promise to Princess Cattlea from Vicius herself, it seems. Demonstrate that her people are worth more to her than Bakoss, and she’ll win her whole empire back. And have to officially rejoin the Sacred Alliance as part of the deal.”

“Rejoining the alliance. You mean they’ll get...?” Seras asked.

“Yep—signed proof of Neah’s independence from the Bakoss Empire, straight from the Goddess herself.”

“Not even Bakoss could go against her orders, then.” Eve nodded knowingly.

“Word is that Bakoss has sent armies to the eastern, southern, and western fronts in huge numbers in response.”

That foul Goddess. This is a dirty trick. At a glance, perhaps the promise of independence could be seen as kind and compassionate—in reality, it’s just to set these two countries at each other’s throats.

With the loss of the Elite Five, Bakoss has lost its identity—they’ll be desperate to prove themselves stronger than Neah by getting results on the battlefield. They’ll want to assert themselves out there, no matter the cost. But if they fail to perform as well as the country they once subjugated, the reputation of their whole empire will be dragged through the mud, and their confidence will only continue to plummet.

Neah are in a tough spot too, competing against a country so motivated to beat them, they'll need to fight like their lives depend on it. And the Goddess...no matter who loses, she wins. She's just in it to watch both countries fight with such high morale even though they were forced into it.

"Erika, I'm surprised you were able to get information like that from all the way here in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters," mused Eve.

"Apparently it's all over the continent, you know? Everyone in Neah has heard the news. Princess Cattlea is going around telling everyone. Likely to create pressure, and stop Vicius from breaking her promise when the time comes."

The citizens can trust a promise from the Goddess—the more people hear it, the higher their morale in Neah.

"Bakossi soldiers have been oppressing the citizens of Neah since the invasion. I'm sure the locals would cast them out if they only had the means to."

Eve leaned back heavily in her chair, making a creaking sound. "Hmph. But it won't be easy to out-perform the Bakoss Empire in battle, will it?"

"But not impossible," Seras cut in. "If the Princess is leading the troops herself, I'm confident she has a plan for victory. And...I don't believe she would be spreading word of the promise if the odds were so against her."

Seras sounded firm, and spoke with conviction.

Erika reached out for her silver cup, but stopped. "You were the Captain of the Band of the Holy Knights of Neah, weren't you Seras? That's why I thought you should know, but... Was it insensitive of me to mention it?"

"No, not at all." Seras gave her a faint, wry smile. "I have died once, after all. My top priority is to help Sir Too-ka as he attempts to fulfill his objective. I have already said my goodbyes to the princess, and..."

She placed a hand across her chest, and her smile widened. "The princess, and the Band of Holy Knights will take back Neah from the clutches of the Bakoss. I'm absolutely sure of it."

"You defeated the Strongest Man in the World in some unknown

forest didn't you? I'd say you've more than played your part to ensure their victory." Erika stroked the side of her cup with her fingertip.

"Sir Too-ka was the one who defeated them—but yes." Seras chuckled and her hand closed into a fist. "As one who did face off against Civit Gartland in combat, I'm relieved that she will never have to stand against that man in combat."

SERAS ASHRAIN

LATER THAT NIGHT, Seras Ashrain sat on the edge of the bed and began to pray.

Princess...good luck in the battle to come.

In her hands, she held the charms around her neck—they had been there ever since Princess Cattlea gave them to her on the day they parted.

"Worried about her?" Too-ka asked, lying on the bed behind her.

Seras smiled. "Yes. I would be lying if I said I wasn't. But the princess has her knights. I'm sure they will be able to protect her."

"You really trust her, don't you."

"She has her path, and I...I have mine. For now, we must trust in the direction we each must take."

"You got to say goodbye though, right?"

"Yes. If we had not, then I don't believe I would be so at peace with the present situation." Seras stood quickly, and went over to the door. "Excuse me, I must go to the restroom."

"You don't need to tell me every time, you know."

"Yes, I remember," Seras chuckled, and left the room.

Outside in the hallway, she stopped and gently clutched a hand to her chest.

Princess... An intense, tight feeling swelled inside her. I should be at peace with this. I should be calm, but I cannot be.

In her hand were the charms she wore around her neck. Cattlea had given them to her the night they said their goodbyes. At least that's what Seras told Too-ka.

But with those Bakossi soldiers and the Elite Five closing in... On that day, there was no time for words of parting.

"If those memories of yours, and the days we spent together are so precious to you, surely that is more than enough? Farewell, then." Those were the last words the princess had ever said to Seras, before urging her to escape.

Even if it meant she'd be left to die, she smiled at me so confidently. But I...

Seras hadn't been able to find the words to say goodbye. When Erika told her that Cattlea planned to lead the army into battle herself, Seras was deeply shaken by the news, even though she didn't show it. She had expected a battle of course, but for the future of the country to be placed on the line...that, she had not predicted.

I'm sure she must have some hope of victory. My faith in her is not misplaced.

But the full confidence she had expressed to Too-ka had been a lie—in fact, she only had half as much.

The princess is daring. If she believes this is her only chance, she might just be willing to take the risk, even if it means putting her own life in danger.

Will Cattlea be safe? Will she survive the battle, and take back Neah from the Bakoss Empire? This is a once in a lifetime chance for the nation. If they let it slip away, who knows when the next one will be. Is that what has driven Cattlea into battle?

Seras had been raised with her, practically as sisters.

Perhaps that's why I understand her—her thinking, and her determination—as if they were my own. But I cannot rush to her defense this time. Please... Please let her be safe.

Now, I am a knight, bound to Too-ka Mimori's service as vice-captain of his Lord of the Flies Brigade. I have my own duties now. I cannot let Sir Too-ka notice my feelings; he has such a surprisingly good eye for the emotions of others. I must hide this from him and focus myself on the task at

hand. I made a vow and gave myself to him. I must use this body of mine to help him achieve his goal. Hesitation, unease...and those other feelings too. I have to lock them away, deep in my heart. I have already made one mistake, by giving in to my emotions. But just that once. I can tell him of my feelings when his journey has come to an end. Until then, I must be his faithful knight. His sword.

I will bind my emotions. That is what it means to serve. I cannot let his goals be contaminated by my feelings for him. I must hold out, at least until he can take his revenge against the Goddess...wait. Wasn't it she who made this promise of Neah's independence in the first place?

If she has somehow tricked the princess, or if something were to happen to her...I would never be able to forgive the Goddess for that.

Seras closed her eyes, and offered up her prayers anew.

If Too-ka can achieve his goal, and if we're both safe and healthy then, I...I wish to see the princess again.

Seras swore it to herself, even more fervently than before, gripping the charms in her hand.

"Seras."

"Eh?" Her heart skipped a beat. She turned her head to see him standing behind her.

"S-Sir Too-ka?" she stammered. "What ever is the matter?"

"Just came to check on you."

Seras tried to relax and form coherent sentences in her head.

"You came to check on me? In truth the talk of Neah did take me somewhat by surprise, but..." She lightly gripped the charms around her neck, trying to make it look completely natural as she forced herself into composure. "I'm fine, thank you. No matter what the result of the battle to come, I know that the princess will someday reclaim Neah with her own two hands. And my apologies for repeating myself, but I am your knight now. I have died once, and no longer have need for these past memories. Now all my strength is yours, and yours alone."

"Mine alone, huh? You sure about that?"

He saw through my lie!

"I-I'm sorry. When it comes to the Holy Empire of Neah...I will admit that I still harbor some feelings for the nation. But please do not

let that concern you. I—”

“Just stop. Stop already,” Too-ka barked.

“But... Sir Too-ka?” She heard him coming closer and knew he was annoyed with her. He really was upset, and it was the first time he had ever directed that feeling toward her.

Seras’ heart quickened and Too-ka stopped, standing directly behind her. She closed her eyes, unable to get a hold of her emotions in time.

“Listen... Why are you crying?”

“Eh?” She looked down, her vision blurred by tears.

When did I start crying? My voice wasn’t shaking, was it? I kept control of that, at least.

Too-ka placed his hand on her head. “You’re not the only one that can see through lies, you know.”

“S-Sir Too-ka?”

“Seras...”

“Y-yes?” She answered, her voice trembling.

“You really are unusual, you know that?”

“Eh?”

“I’ve never been angry at anyone like this, not even my foster mother.”

His foster mother?

“To be honest, I think it’s the first time I’ve ever felt like this.”

He’s talking about anger, but there’s no anger in his voice. Only kindness and a little confusion. It’s almost as if he’s surprised at his own feelings.

“Listen, Seras.”

“Y-yes...”

“Stop already. Be selfish, at least once in your life. You’ve probably forgotten, but...I said I would do you a favor, didn’t I? Anything you want. Just once, though.”

“Sir Too-ka? What do you mean?”

“You want to go and save her, don’t you? To help the princess, but

you'll never say that to me. You can't."

I can't. This isn't right!

"N-no. I..."

"Erika was there at dinner so I didn't want to point it out in front of everyone but it was obvious how you were feeling."

"I...I see."

"Traveling with you all these weeks, I can easily see how important this princess is to you. Look...you said my expression looks totally different when I talk about my foster parents, didn't you? But don't you realize the look you get on your face whenever you talk about that princess of yours?"

"M-my face?"

"You smile just thinking about her, and then you hear she's going off to fight in some war you're not even sure she'll survive... It'd be unreasonable of me to expect you to stay calm at a time like this."

"Th-that's..."

"I know you're keeping a lid on your feelings, doing your best to act as my sword, and I'm thankful for that. But It'd be wrong of me to ask you to hold back feelings toward someone who's really important to you."

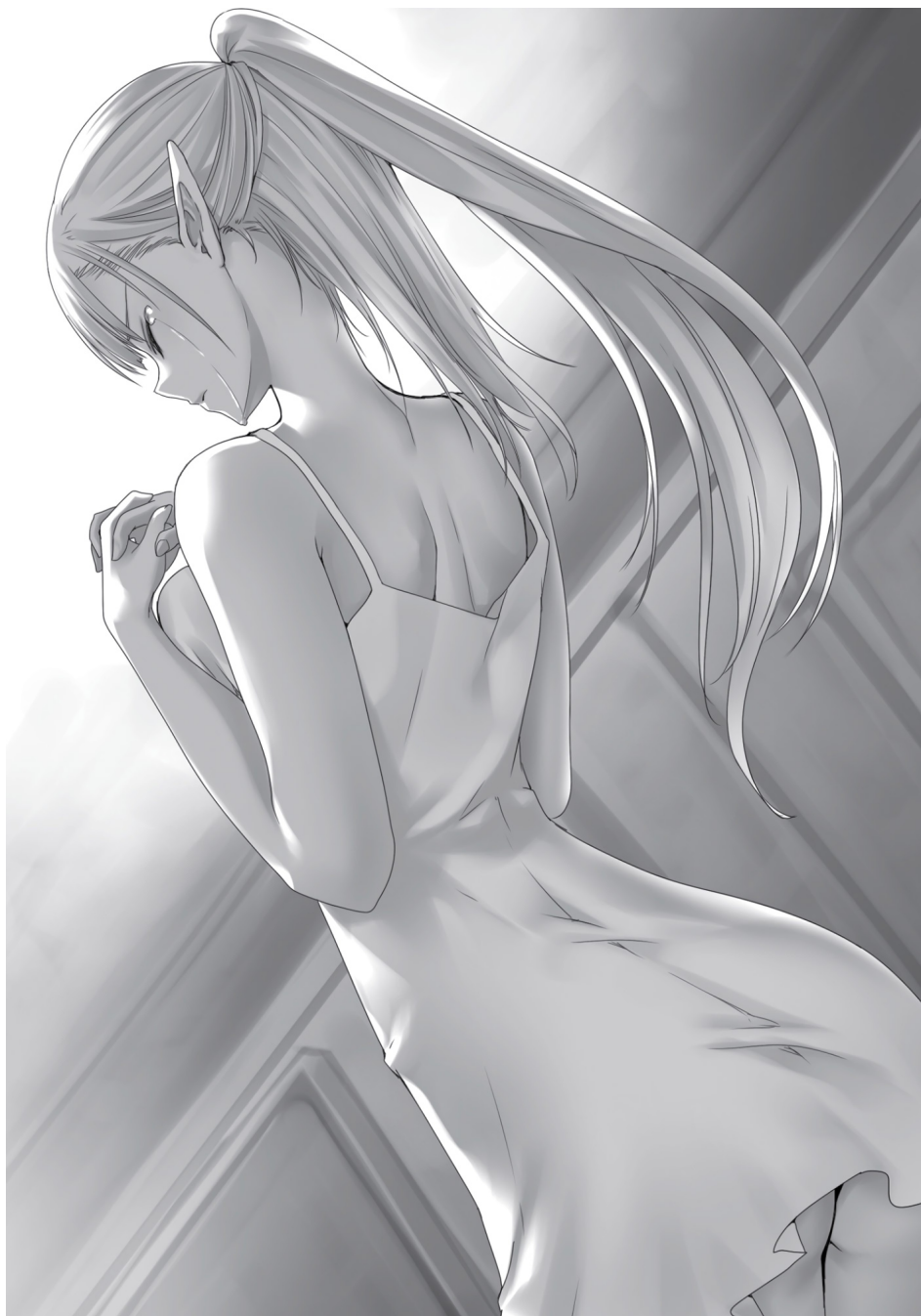
Seras' face was a mess—she tried desperately to hold the words back and regain her composure. "Sir Too-ka, but I...we already said our goodbyes."

"No you didn't."

"What?"

"If you really got to say goodbye to her in the way you wanted, you wouldn't look so torn up about it. Your acting has a long way to go, Seras."

She clenched her teeth. She tried to hold back the tears—to at least stop herself from sobbing. But the doubts wouldn't stop echoing in her mind.



Why...why is he like this? Why is he always looking out for me?

"I know the pain of leaving someone without getting to say a proper goodbye," said Too-ka.

A proper goodbye. Seras suddenly realized. *Ah...that's right. He never had the chance to say goodbye to the people most important to him either.*

"If you want to continue to be my sword and fulfill your oath, then that's fine by me. But that can wait until after you've seen the princess and said what you need to say."

"But I..."

"I talked with Erika more after dinner. Princess Cattlea's on the southern front—they haven't seen real combat as of yet."

Seras gasped.

He continued, "At first the Demon Empire's armies moved in lockstep, but while there's fighting in the east and west it's still going to be a while until the southern front sees any large-scale battles. Not to mention I hear there are a lot of mercenaries in the fight. We could use that to our advantage to blend in with the crowd."

"Sir Too-ka, do you really mean that...? You mean to go into battle against the Demon Empire's forces? But we're already *here*, in the center of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters."

"We went through them all to get here, didn't we?" Too-ka had his back turned, but Seras could sense the twisted smile on his face. "There's no way we wouldn't be able to make it out of here."

"I..."

"Let me be clear with you, Seras." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "You might be good at seeing through lies, but you're terrible at telling them. You can't shut down all your emotions. Not enough to deceive even yourself." Too-ka chuckled. "The moment you thought you could hide this from me. That was your mistake."

A feeling rushed through Seras' whole body, as if a weight had been lifted.

There's no point. I can't hide anything from him. I'll only end up pouring out whatever is truly in my heart.

"You want to help the princess," he said. "At the very least, you

want the chance to say goodbye. That's it, right?"

The tears came again and Seras began to sob uncontrollably. She tried to wipe the tears streaming down her face, but they only came faster. They wouldn't stop, nor would the violent, trembling waves of emotion washing over her.

She nodded.

"That's all right then." He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "Let's go." He took his hand from her shoulder and walked past to leave. He stopped in the doorway, and spoke without turning to look back. "Prepare for war."

Seras gave up trying to stop the tears, and smiled at him with everything she had left.

"Yes. Yes, Sir Too-ka."

"One more thing."

He turned his head, but not to look at her. His eyes were blacker than the darkest depths of any cave Seras had ever known.

"If I can make this work—if everything comes together..." All of the warmth was gone from his jet-black eyes—they were staring into the darkness somewhere far off in the distance. "This could be a good opportunity. There are people I want to destroy."

MIMORI TOUKA

“SO YOU WANT to sneak onto the southern front as part of the Sacred Alliance?" asked Erika, with a look of astonishment on her face. "I don't have any right to stop you, of course, but...have you lost your mind?"

"If we make it through the northern part of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, it should be possible to meet up with the southern army, right?"

"Well...I hear they're all converging on the Magnari capital of Shinad, so it's likely you could get yourselves signed up there. Given the speed of the troops marching from Neah, and the distance from here to Shinad... If you make it across the border, I suppose you could arrive

there in time.”

A spark of hope lit up on Seras’ face. She looked toward me in relief.

“That’s *if* you make it across.” Erika had a troubled look. The soft light of a bedside lamp fell on Erika’s face from the side, casting a shadow on her face in more ways than one.

“So you’re saying that time isn’t the issue here, I take it. What’s the problem?” I asked.

“Getting across the northern border is the problem.” Erika sat cross-legged on her bed, drawing an invisible map in the air with her index finger. “You got here from Ulza, right? You came up through the south.”

I think I know what she’s trying to say.

“The monsters are stronger in the north than in the south?”

“Correct. North is where the truly nasty ones live.”

Seras’ relieved expression started to crack.

“There are many theories on why that is, but I figure it’s because the north is closer to the source of all evil. Stronger monsters tend to cast out the weak, so the little ones keep moving south. Just speculation, though.”

“Ahem, Miss Erika, what if we were to take a path to the east or west, then—”

“That’d delay you, and you’d miss the battle.”

“Is there no other way to reach the southern front in time?” I asked.

“No way that ol’ Erika here knows of,” she said, her shoulders sinking as she spoke.

“We don’t have any choice then, do we,” I said. “No choice but to join the southern front by going through the northern region of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.”

Seras bit her lip, trying to hold back her frustration. “But Sir Tooka, wouldn’t that be too dangerous for us?”

“If you still feel the same way about that princess of yours, then nothing’s changed,” I interrupted. “If there are monsters in our way,

we'll dispose of them."

"It might not be totally impossible, knowing those status effect skills of yours," added Erika. "From what I've heard you're effective against large groups of enemies, and you did defeat that Soul Eater. You need to be cautious, but if you overestimate your enemies, you might just end up letting this chance slip away. Don't be *too* scared of the monsters in the north, I mean."

She stood and went over to a set of drawers in the corner. She opened a drawer, pulled out one of the many rolled-up scrolls inside, and spread it out on the table.

"This is a map of the north, based on information my familiars have gathered for me."

We huddled around it to take a look.

I'd heard it was impossible to map this place. But the Forbidden Witch managed it somehow.

"What's this line?" I asked, pointing to a spot on the map.

"That will be your most likely route, I think. It's a track the larger monsters usually pass through, which has flattened the land along that line."

"The fact that you took the time to draw this out... Were you planning on leaving this place someday?"

Erika and I locked eyes.

"Well, in another century maybe, yeah."

"You make it sound like a century wouldn't be that long for you to wait."

Seras looked as if she'd just realized something. "Miss Erika, are you contracted to some kind of spirit...?"

"Yeah. You saw the lake with the mana at the bottom on your way here, didn't you?"

"Y-yes."

"The one producing all that is a spirit named Lunored, who dwells inside this sacred tree. A spirit that's attached to a single place. So, in return for protecting this place from other humans and monsters, the spirit provides me with mana for my experiments and research," said Erika.

I'd heard that elves aren't good at manipulating mana—they can't store or produce as much as humans can. But the witch must've needed a lot for her tools and experiments—that's why she chose this place.

"I've been blessed with a great talent for magic, dark elf that I am, but not even this place contains enough mana for the magical items that the great Erika Anaorbael wishes to make."

"The only spirit capable of producing mana... I have read the legends in the ancient texts, but to think it truly exists!" said Seras in amazement.

"Real shy one, this Lunored, always making sure nobody knows it's even there. I figure a high elf would be able to detect it though. How long have you known?"

"It was so faint, I thought it was only a trace. That perhaps a spirit lived here once before."

"Erika," I said, cutting into the conversation, "is it that you don't want to leave, or that you *can't*?"

She left a moment's pause before answering.

"The latter."

"You've made a contract to reside here with this spirit, haven't you, Miss Erika? That's why Lunored has agreed to grant you its power."

"That's right. Sorry, but that means I can't go with you."

"Please, do not concern yourself about that. We're more than grateful enough just to be shown a map to set us on the right path."

I studied Erika's expression—she looked a little unhappy with the situation. After that, we discussed the route in more detail. Once we were done, Erika rolled up the map and handed it to me.

"Here, take it."

"You sure?"

"Use it as you like, but be careful. This thing isn't perfect, as you can see. Don't get cocky." Erika poured herself a silver cup of water from a pitcher and drank it down in a single gulp. "I'll have a think about what I can do to support you. Let's talk more in the morning."

I visited Erika in her room early the next morning, but she wasn't there.

Meaning...she must be in her lab downstairs?

I went downstairs, opened the door, climbed the ladder down, and heard sounds of shuffling coming from behind one of the other workshop doors.

I opened the door the noise was coming from, and stepped through into a cavernous room, even more spacious than the one where we'd experimented on Piggymaru. The whole place was chilly, unlike the stuffy lab she'd shown me earlier.

Erika had her head and shoulders buried in a heap of things, her backside in the air, clearly searching for something.

"Morning," she said without turning to look at me.

"Changing the environment to look like morning, noon and night. Is that so you don't lose track of time?"

"Yeah, that's about it. So, what do you want?"

"I wanted to talk, just the two of us. Seras is still asleep."

She backed out of the heap slowly and dexterously, her knees scraping along the floor.

"What is it then?" she said, finally emerging.

"First, about why you're being so cooperative all of a sudden."

"Look... I'm sorry, okay?"

She knows what I'm going to ask about then.

"So that's the reason—that you feel guilty?"

Erika raised both hands in surrender. "It was careless of me to talk about the Princess of the Holy Empire of Neah like that. Seras looked so happy traveling with you, I thought she'd gotten over her past."

"So she didn't react like you expected she would?"

"I mean, come on. That face she made at dinner, anybody could tell how much she feels for her princess. I suppose she was trying to hide it, but it wasn't working at all. I feel bad is all, that's why I came down here last night and started searching..."

"Well," I said, "In the end it's much better than Seras having never known. I was a little surprised that you didn't try to stop us at all

though.”

“I knew it wouldn’t have mattered. My only duty was to tell you how difficult the northern path is going to be.” Erika brushed the dust off her shoulders. “And like I said, I’m going to try and support you however I can.”

She took a deep breath and gestured deeper into the room.

“There’s something I want to show you.” She led me to a double door on the far side, and I followed her in after she pushed it wide open with both hands. There, enshrined in the center, was...

“Is that...a carriage?” I asked.

“Perhaps more suitable to call it a *war chariot*,” Erika replied.

A horse-drawn carriage adapted for combat. There was space for people to ride inside, but it was obvious why Erika had referred to it as a war chariot. The black exterior had clearly been crafted with enemy attacks in mind.

“This is the magical war chariot I used when I first came here. I thought I might use it again someday once my contract with Lunored ends. But...”

“Don’t tell me, you’re giving this to us?”

“What, you think I was just showing it off? Just some self-serving bragging? ‘Hey Too-ka, come look at my super cool war chariot?! Jealous?! You want one, right?!’”

Was that little act really necessary?

In any case, this thing’s big—it really stands out. If we use this thing to race through the forest the monsters are going to have no problem finding us. But of course, Erika has probably already realized that.

“Does this thing have some kind of special power?”

“Awareness blocking, yes.”

“So...monsters nearby won’t be aware that this thing is passing them by?”

“That’s a fair interpretation, yes.”

I looked back toward the war chariot. “I see. That really is a special ability.”

“But it only has around a third of its power remaining. I used up

most of it getting here.”

“It can’t be recharged, then?”

“These magical items made with ancient, secret techniques are always one-shots. Not even I, the great Anaorbael, can comprehend how to recharge it, much as it vexes me.”

Lost technology then.

“You don’t mind if I use all the rest of its power?”

“Go ahead. I’ll think of another way to escape this place.” She walked over to the chariot. “Problem is, the magical creature I created to pull this thing wore out the moment it reached this tree. It took me years to make that thing.”

“So this all depends on Sleir,” I said. “In her third stage of transformation, I think it *should* be possible.”

I had shown Sleir’s third stage to Erika a few days earlier, but even the Forbidden Witch herself couldn’t give me any information about what Sleir was exactly.

“It should get you through half of the northern land without even being detected. Wonderful, don’t you think?”

It was. No two ways about it. We can always leave the thing behind after we’ve ridden halfway there if we have to. Still, this war chariot... It looks really aggressive. Whether we have to leave it behind or take it all the way is going to depend on how useful this thing is in a fight.

I could make out some throwing spears attached to the sides—Erika explained that it had all kinds of offensive capabilities, aside from just the awareness blocking.

“I’ll even give you some of my other homemade magical devices as a bonus. But they’re all experimental, none of them will last long, so be careful how you use them.”

“Are those what you were searching for earlier?” The stuff in this room was piled up so high, I just thought it was all junk. “Well, if it’ll help us out in a fight, I’ll take anything I can get. So, how are we going to get this up to the surface?”

“Ridiculous. I am Erika Anaorbael, you know? My golems will bring it up to the surface, don’t concern yourself about that. Oh, and since you’re going to blend in as mercenaries, I take it you’ll be calling

yourselves the *Lord of the Flies Brigade*?”

“Yeah.”

“Wait there a sec.”

Erika left, and came back a few moments later with one of her golems in tow. She held up three sets of black robes for me to see.

“Take these, make a big splash for your first impression.”

Those robes, how should I put this... It's like they were custom-made for the Lord of the Flies and his subordinates themselves. They'd make me look like even more of a bad guy boss than the Great Sage's robes already do. They'd go well with the mask, too.

“You find these out there, in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters?”

“Originally, yes. I fixed them up a little for you...wanted to give them to you before you left. What do you think? They're cool, right?” said Erika excitedly, her eyes sparkled and her breathing was quicker than usual.

No smile as always, but she looks happy. So it wasn't just for Eve and Lis—she must really like tailoring clothes like this.

“They don't look half bad, yeah.”

Erika showed me the lining, like she was on some shopping channel trying to get me to call in and buy. “It's not just about the looks, you know? These robes are practical too! There's black lion spider weave in here, so they're super durable and resistant to fire. Awesome, right?”

Apparently, she had spent a lot of work on Eve and Seras' cloaks in particular.

I laid a hand on my injured shoulder. If I'd had protection like that, none of this would have happened. I looked from the robes to the cloaks and back—they matched perfectly.

Finally, this is starting to feel like a real Lord of the Flies Brigade.

I gave Erika my hand in thanks. “As leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, I accept your master crafted gear, Erika Anaorbael. We will gladly wear it in battle.”

Chapter 3: The Heroes' Battle

THE SCENERY RUSHED by us, dark trees that seemed to go on forever. Our black carriage rushed through the forest and the dense canopy shielded us from the sun above. The great, horned, devilish black horse's hooves pounded the earth below in a pleasant and regular rhythm beneath us.

"Slei seems to be doing fine out there."

I stood in the footholds on the roof of our war chariot, watching Slei gallop further and further into the dark. I was somewhat worried about whether she'd be able to pull our weight, but all those fears had been put to rest. Slei's injury was healed, and she could easily bear the war chariot forward. On the chariot's roof was a wide area with footholds, and a low fence to stop anyone from falling off.

Three people could fit up here without it getting too cramped—we could take up position here and use the carriage to ambush someone if we wanted.

"You sure you're okay with coming along?"

"Just as I told you before we departed, my feelings haven't changed," replied Eve Speed, looking straight ahead as I sat down next to her. When she had offered to help us on our mission, it seemed Seras hadn't even considered the possibility.

"This mission is purely for my sake," she'd said. "Not to mention... you and Lis have found yourself a place to live in peace. There is no need for you to fight anymore."

But to that, Eve had replied, *"I guided you here with that magic map. I might have fulfilled my obligations to Too-ka but my debt to you, Seras is yet unpaid. Whenever Too-ka and I fought, you protected Lis. That's how I was able to focus on combat. On the honor of the Speed Clan, I knew a time would come when my debt to Seras Ashrain would be due. That time is now, Seras."*

There was a strong, unwavering determination in Eve's voice—one that Seras hadn't been able to refuse. I understood how much Seras

had done for us in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters too. She was down resting in the carriage now, since her turn at the watch was over.

Eve turned to look at me. “You’d rather have me with you on this journey through the northern reaches than not, wouldn’t you?”

“You’re not wrong there.”

Can’t discount the benefit of having Eve’s hearing and sight in our toolkit, especially making our way through a dangerous place like this.

“But considering how Lis felt, I wasn’t sure whether to ask you to come with us.”

“Heh heh. She and I spoke about that before. About what I would do if you or Seras were to need my help. It was always her dream to live together with me, but she said that she’d support me if I wanted to try and help you and Seras. She didn’t want to be the only one happy—you two should be as well. She said that she was only able to be happy because of the things you’ve done for her.” Eve smiled a little at that. “All she regrets is that she needed to be protected...and that she can’t come with us herself.”

I clicked my tongue. “Lis is such a good kid.”

“It’s important to care for the people you love while you still can, Lis and I both know that. We also know the pain of not being able to help them. If I don’t lend you my strength now, I may regret it for the rest of my life.

“And Too-ka, I think that magical device had a big part in reassuring Lis about all this.”

I stuck my hand in my pocket and pulled it out. “This, huh.”

A teleportation crystal.

The crystal glimmered a vibrant purple, and there were a great many more smaller gems hidden inside, each engraved with tiny, indiscernible symbols. According to Erika, it was a magical item made with ancient and secret techniques.

Once only, it will carry all within its range to a certain, designated spot.

It was a treasure worthy even of the secret vaults of the Wizard’s Guild. It had three uses, but Erika had already used the other two. She wanted to save the last one for an emergency teleport back here, but

seeing Lis say goodbye to Eve, she couldn't hold it back.

The crystal could be split into two parts—one to draw a magic symbol on the ground to define the area, and one to activate that area to teleport everyone inside to the destination. It was currently set to a corner of the witch's house.

Even if worse comes to worst, we can still send Eve home to the witch with this crystal.

"I don't put any faith in that thing myself, aside from its usefulness in setting Lis' mind at ease," said Eve.

"I already told you, didn't I?" I said. "If you find yourself in danger, you're using that crystal, no matter what."

"Hmph. Then I'll have to try not to get too deep into combat."

I cocked my head and snorted at her jokingly. "Yeah. You be careful out there."

That said, it might be safest for all three of us to return to the witch's house together.

Eve was back in her leopardman form now, likely because she was stronger that way. In the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters there was no need for her to hide.

"I never expected you'd care so much about the Goddess of Alion," said Eve.

I'd only intended to stay with Eve and Lis as far as the witch's house, so I figured they wouldn't need to know about that, but I ended up telling them in the end.

"If you had that forbidden magic with you now, would you be going straight to challenge the Goddess after this mission is done?"

"I would, yeah. But it turns out Erika couldn't read the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic. Looks like that's all going to have to wait."

I kinda had a feeling she wasn't able to read them from the moment I showed them to her. When I gave her them at first, she spread them out on the table. There were clearly sentences written on those scrolls—even I could tell that much. But Erika was looking at them more as a curiosity. Following her eyes, she didn't look to be reading them, only checking if the scrolls were genuine or not. They won't be of any use to me unless I can find someone who can decipher them.

“I think Erika knows someone who can read them. And she’s been testing my character to see whether it’s safe for her to introduce me to them. That was just a theory at first, but when I asked Erika herself before we left...”

“You were right?” asked Eve.

“Yeah.”

So unfortunately this mission to save the princess isn’t also going to net us that forbidden magic. I can’t reveal my true identity to the Goddess’ side yet. We have to move carefully.

“Hmph, Erika did say she would give you the information once she’s able to trust you. I wonder if that’s true?”

“It seems I’ve already earned her trust.” It was sown into the lining of the robes she gave me. “She told me about a place, and a group of demi-humans called the Forbidden Words Clan. She also gave me a key to get inside.”

Eve’s ears stood on end.

“You don’t mean—”

“Erika called it *The Country at the End of the World*... Have you heard of it?”

“I thought it was just a legend.”

“To get through the door, apparently you usually need the help of one of the two divine beasts. But Erika gave me a key that the country’s king granted her long ago.”

“Hmph, I see. I understand what made her so cautious now.”

“I think she’s a really, really good person at heart.”

I could tell from the short time we spent together. She might be pessimistic about everything, but she hasn’t given up on trusting others yet. She let us in after all...maybe she was just waiting for someone to trust this whole time.

She’s naïve too, like Eve and Lis, although with a colder eye for the evils of the world. But there’s somewhere deep inside her that the cold and cruelty can’t reach—somewhere that wants to trust others, that wants to see the good in people.

But there are some scum that can’t be saved...evil that wears a mask of virtue, infesting our world.

In the end, Erika had trusted me, and given me the key.

Naïve...but that's exactly what I like about her. Same goes for Seras, Eve and Lis too. They're all pure and good. Just like my foster parents were.

I should protect the pure and the good of this world. That's what I believe, at least. But there are some poisons in this world that run too deep. Evil that devours the good, wherever it finds it.

I'll fight poison with poison. I'll become the evil that can fight evil. I'll devour it all.

Our war chariot sped through the darkening forest.

"Well," Without thinking, I began to smile. "I do love crushing scum, after all."

I have to admit I have a sadistic streak.

"Hmph? Crushing...? Too-ka, what are you talking abo—"

"Eve," I interrupted.

"Eh?" She drew her arms in closer, and straightened her back. I stared out into the dark void in the distance. "On this mission, your survival is my top priority. That teleportation crystal...just know I won't be angry with you, no matter how you choose to use it."

With the magical war chariot the Forbidden Witch had given us, and giving Sleis the appropriate time to rest, we completed our journey halfway across the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

"Thanks to Sleis's speed and that awareness blocking spell, looks like we're going to get there even sooner than expected." I put the map away, and kneeled down on the roof of the chariot.

To my left and right were Seras Ashrain and Eve Speed, both clad all in black. On my shoulder sat my slime, and before me my fearsome, horned, jet-black steed pulled our chariot.

The brush some ways off in the distance rustled, then exploded with movement.

"Gisheaaaah!" Two huge golden-eyed monsters leaped out.

The unique ability of our war chariot—its awareness blocking—had run out. From here on out, we were going to have to fight.

Seras pointed her loaded crossbow toward the threat. Eve held a long flail with a spiked ball at the end. Both weapons were taken from the witch's house.

"Don't worry, Sleis—we'll clear a path for you."

If you're coming to attack us, I've got no mercy for you.

I stuck my arm out, carefully calculating the range between myself and the threat.

Seras and Eve crouched, ready to fight.

"Right, then. Let's get started then, shall we?"

SOGOU AYAKA

THE DEMON KING had appeared in the east.

The Goddess furrowed her brow at the news, and Oyamada stuck his head out from the back seat of his carriage.

"Hey, hey, hey, Goddess-chaaan?! What's with the last boss showin' up so freakin' soon?! We're in deep, ain't we?! This over or what?! Those guys in the east all dead already?!"

Yasu folded his arms. "Hmph, I suppose this means that Hijiri and Itsuki were merely side characters after all. Perfect casting, if you ask me."

Ayaka swallowed.

The enemy commander, out on the battlefield...

"One of the greatest tragedies in this world is for those that truly have power to be unable to fully demonstrate it. Your failure of command in not utilizing me may send shockwaves through the enemy ranks." Kiriara brought his horse level with the Goddess'. "No hero has been less fortunate than I have. Hijiri was given an opportunity to use her skills—as a favor, no less. Vicius, do you know what it is that has me worried of late?"

"Will you be quiet for a moment? I'm thinking."

"It's that this Demon King will end up being such a loser that Hijiri defeats him before I do," he continued remorsefully, ignoring the

Goddess' words. "With Sogou out of the running, Hijiri and I are the only ones even close to the top. That's fine and all...but if all this sputters out because of your preferential treatment of her, it would be the very definition of a let-down."

Kirihara clicked his tongue and sighed. "The weak are just so amazingly stupid. I have to get results to let them feel the difference in our strength—in a way that will get through to them. You're nothing more than a con-artist, if you continue to hold me back from my destiny."

The Goddess leaned forward on her horse and covered her mouth with her hand. After a few more moments of silence, she seemed to decide on a course of action.

"Then let us go east, Kirihara."

Kirihara brushed the hair from his forehead—as if he'd expected the Goddess' reply, as if it were only natural. "I only pray it's not already too late..."

Agit drew his horse closer to the Goddess'.

"You going too, Vicius?"

"I feel that I am being baited by the Demon King, but I can hardly sit idly by and do nothing now, can I? The Takao Sisters and White Wolf Riders are there of course—but the Demon King himself on the battlefield? That changes matters."

"Do you think you'll make it in time?"

"We shall travel by magical guide horse."

Before leaving Alion, Ayaka had been told a little about the magical guide horses—special steeds created using the power of the Goddess and the Wizard's Guild combined. They were capable of traveling leagues faster than any normal horse, but there were only a limited number that existed in the world. Each army had only several assigned to them at a time.

"You and I will travel to the eastern front together then. Shall we, Kirihara?"

"You're going to leave us and the rest of the heroes here?" asked Agit.

"The reinforcements from Ulza on standby in the south will also

be marching east.”

Aside from the three main armies in the west, south, and east, there were two more armies on standby in Magnari territory—one of Ulzan troops in the south east, and one of Miran forces in the south west. They were in position to reinforce in whichever front needed them most.

“These movements may well be intended to lead us into a trap—is that what you think, Vicius?”

“While there is still unrest on both the western and southern fronts, I believe we should retain our forces here. But as I said, the Demon King himself appearing in the east is something I cannot ignore.”

The Goddess’ face was smiling, but her eyes were not. She commanded the magical guide horses to be brought at once before firing off a series of orders to the Alionese generals. As always they were rapid and precise.

Oyamada and Yasu grumbled a little about not being taken along, but the Goddess quietened them down with a single word. Agit approached the Goddess again once she had finished her first round of orders.

“Huh? Not taking Ayaka Sogou with you? I thought given the history, you would need all the strongest heroes to take down the Demon King?”

“But this year we have three S-class heroes, you see. And, well, using a precious magical guide horse on an S-class with no unique skills to speak of...frankly, I don’t think we can justify it. I suppose that specialist skill tree is the best that she can do. How regrettable.”

She put a hand to her cheek and sighed dramatically.

“In my judgment...once this battle is over, we should move Sogou-san down to B-class.”

The Goddess looked down at the ground despairingly. “My measurement crystal can make mistakes, you know. And with such a difference in power between them, it only serves to cause confusion. It simply must be done. I shall come forward and admit my mistake. I was wrong to ever call you an S-class, Sogou. Sometimes we must have the courage to admit to our errors in judgment. You have no objections of

course, do you Sogou? Oh, of course you don't."

Ayaka held her emotions in, giving her only two words in response.

"No objections."

"Wonderful that you don't try to debate me. Well... I am so sorry for how terribly strict I have been with you Sogou. I expected great things from you as an S-class, you understand. But now that I see you were a mere B-class all along, I have nothing left to say to you. Please continue to do your utmost in life, among those faint-colored heroes who might well have been holding you back this whole time. Do try not to lose hope. I gave you three chances, out of the kindness of my heart, but no matter how you tried, it all came to nothing. Zero results. How should I put this?" The Goddess looked sadly at her, as if piercing Ayaka with her smile. "Thank you for your efforts."

A soldier came to report that the horses were ready. The Goddess turned her mount on the spot, and galloped it toward the tented camp nearby. Kirihara turned to follow, looking back at Ayaka with disdain.

"Aside from this misfortune I've been forced to endure, this other world isn't all bad. I feel like the divide between the real and the fake is becoming clearer with every passing day. That vagueness was so tiresome in the other world. The strong should be clearly separated from the weak."

Kirihara looked out over the eastern sky, filled with a renewed sense of entitlement.

"If it turns out Hijiri has killed you, I'll be forced to doubt your true power, Demon King," Kirihara muttered as if to himself, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Nobody else's death could serve to show the true Kirihara to these weaklings. Nobody can kill you but me... *nobody*."

After Kirihara and the Goddess left, Oyamada began furiously clapping his hands together.

"Bha hah hah! Like, seriously Ayaka?! *Pffh!* The downfall show of the season, jeeez! Ayaka-senpai's gonna have to use her sex appeal to get by from now on eh?! Hot! This plot turn is *blazin'* hot!"

"Hey, Shougo, about Takuto..."

“Huh?”

It was Murota Erii, a girl from Kirihara’s group who stood out for her bright makeup, big accessories, and voluminous dyed hair. When Kirihara had cut off all the legs of a monster and used it as bait in the Ancient Dragon Ruins, Erii had been one of the girls who’d been taken aback and thought he went too far.

“Takuto’s, like, been kinda weird since he got here, hasn’t he?”

“Huh? Y’think?”

“Like, did he always talk so much? In the old world, he was so cool and quiet, like...he’d just talk when he had something to say, or like to decide stuff. That was pretty cool and awesome, y’know.”

“This is a totally different world though yeah? I dunno, but he’s gotta change to survive, maybe? Like, now he’s here he’s gotta release his true self, let it roam free! Or somethin’.”

“I don’t know about releasing himself or whatever...but look. Yasu’s gotten so arrogant now it’s grossin’ me out. There’s been somethin’ off about Asagi too, ever since we got here.”

Ayaka felt it too—several students had changed since they’d arrived in this new world.

Oyamada called it Kirihara’s true self. Did the hero summoning have some kind of power to draw that out of us?

“You okay? Looks like you’re struggling with something.”

Banewolf brought his horse up next to Ayaka’s and looked in the direction the Goddess had ridden away in.

“Those words of hers are as harsh as ever, eh? She never lets up. I don’t like to think that results are all that matters m’self, though.” He took out a toothpick and put it in his mouth. “If you really try your hardest at something, that’s worth praising. No matter how it ends up.” His shoulders sank. “Hey, I mean I’m lazy, right? I don’t get what it takes to put your all into doing something. But, well...looking at your group, Sogou-chan, and all the work you’ve done with them. I figure that’s worth praising, yknow?”

A faint smile formed at the side of Ayaka’s mouth.

“You tend to think in the long-term, don’t you, Bane-san?”

“The less quickly you expect results from me, the easier I find it to

perform after all. But hey, while I'm not siding with her here, I don't think that Goddess has the time to sit and watch you grow over a couple years."

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine," she responded, straightening her back and turning to look forward. "I think I understand the way the Goddess has been treating me a little better now, though that doesn't make it much easier to bear. If I stop rising to it, she'll stop scolding me eventually."

Banewolf looked surprised.

"It's unfortunate that I haven't been blessed with a unique skill, that much is true," she continued, "but I'm not powerless. I've leveled up, spent time honing my techniques." She gripped the reins and looked back at Suou Kayako riding a short distance away, next to the carriage holding the rest of Ayaka's group. They peeked out at her with nervous looks in their eyes. "I'm sure that I'm not so powerless that I can't protect anyone."

Banewolf followed her gaze to the carriage and to Suou Kayako.

"It's good you can stay positive."

"I haven't been doing all this for the Goddess anyway. I want to get everyone back to the old world. I've been trying to protect them. And if what she just told me is true, then until this battle is over I'm still an S-class hero."

Ayaka was only half-joking when she spoke those final words.

The Alionese army stopped by the White Citadel of Protection for supplies, and to meet up with the Neahan and Bakossi forces. All three armies were scheduled to leave once they had finished their resupply. There was a small castle town at the foot of the citadel itself—usually quiet, but bustling with activity on that day. A temporary peace fell over the rows of tents that made up each army's camp outside the walls. The white citadel, standing tall on its gently sloping hill shone brighter than ever in the sunlight.

The castle was known as a spot where representatives from all nations would gather for discussions. The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters lay directly to the south, but monsters rarely ventured out.

I hear that they used to come out of the forest quite regularly...

“This citadel has stood here through the ages, protecting the surrounding countryside. There was even a time when a hero from another world was given charge of this place. In an age of great danger, the Goddess used that hero’s power to drive the monsters back. Yes, this place is important. Not just to Magnar, but to all the nations of the continent,” explained Commandant Guila Heidt, the current guardian of the citadel.

Guila Heidt was a well-built, bearded older man of heroic blood, a descendent of the hero from another world who once took charge of the citadel. His eyes shone when he spoke of the history of the place.

“I’m sure you’re all aware the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters is a dangerous place. But to the monsters that dwell there, the area surrounding this citadel poses just as much a danger to them as they to us. In fact they rarely appear in these parts anymore. Thanks to the convenient placement of the castle, we are also honored to host discussions between representatives of the Sacred Alliance.”

Guila excitedly scanned the faces of the gathering commanders before him, proud that they were here in *his* citadel. There had been another meeting of the nations not long ago, but the faces before him were different now. The Goddess had left Baron Pollary in charge of the southern Alionese army. From the Bakossi army there was Bach Mongoose, Walter Eisbein and Gus Dolnfedd—the Elite Three dragon knights, and successors to the fallen Elite Five.

Bach pushed his cup across the table, looking displeased.

“I had expected this battle would be the perfect chance to demonstrate to the honorable Goddess the strength of we Black Dragon Knights reborn. To think she would leave the southern front, even if it does happen to be an emergency. I have been well and truly let down.” Bach glared at Baron Pollary accusingly, and got a smirk in response.

“I of course cannot measure the worth of the Black Dragon Knights now that the Elite Five are gone. But with your influence and power waning, I certainly can sympathize with how desperate you must be.”

Bach slammed both hands down on the table and stood—the veins popping on his forehead. “I will not stand for that, Baron Pollary! We will show you more than the Elite Five ever could, just you wait!”

“More than the Elite Five you say... Quite the claim.” Baron

Pollary appeared bored, stroking his fine beard.

“What do you mean?! I was given command by the Goddess herself! If you continue to provoke me...”

“Now, now, you two,” cut in Agit Angun, sitting with the other Four Holy Elders. Bach sat back down in his chair, shaking his fists with an anger that now had nowhere to go. “The Four Holy Elders of Yonato, I take it? Hmph, you’ve some nerve interfering in our business, lad.”

Guila was relieved to see that things appeared to be settling down. The slim-faced, slant-eyed Walter turned his sharp gaze to the three young ones standing against the wall.

“Speaking of lads, those are still mere children. Can those heroes really fight?”

Only the S and A-class heroes had been summoned to this meeting—Ayaka, Oyamada and Yasu. Oyamada clenched his fist, and raised it aggressively.

“Huh? Someone makin’ light of me, are they? You wanna start somethin’? Say that again, and I’ll kill y—aghhhhh?!”

Abis made a show of putting an arm around his shoulder, clamping it hard around his neck.

“This one’s even weaker’n me! All the good heroes went east.”

“G-get...o-off...m-me...c-cow...t-tits!”

“Oh, good for you, Oyamada—gettin’ a little sideboob in your face, eh? Can’t hear you? Speak up, kiddo, or don’t you got the guts?!” Abis punched him in the stomach, and he collapsed to the floor, bent over double.

“Gah, ugh?! Y-you... I’m going to kill you someday!”

“Yeah, yeah, try it, then. When you’re done with your job here, come kill me before you go back to your old world! What’s that? Not feeling up to it, little boy?”

“Die!”

The master of the citadel and Elite Three looked taken aback by what they saw. Bach and Walter looked practically despondent. Banewolf, who was also leaning against the wall next to the heroes, smiled at them all fearlessly.

“Don’t worry, the heroes here can all fight well enough. They’ve

been taught by the Dragonslayer himself.”

Bach put his elbows on the table and leaned in, studying Banewolf closely.

“The Dragonslayer. I’ve seen the cargo you brought with you down in the corner of the citadel grounds. So the rumors are true, or they wouldn’t have bothered the soldiers to drag that thing all the way here.”

Banewolf shrugged his shoulders indifferently. The citadel master Guila picked up the conversation, trying to get things back on track.

“I hear that heroes are not affected by Demon King Essence. That alone is reason to be reassured by their presence. The essence was so strong during the fall of Argyle, that not even the former Captain of the White Wolf Riders could stand against the invaders. Hearing stories of the enemy’s flag flying over Argyle now, the attack must have been too terrifying to even imagine.”

Bach folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, looking forward at a woman with curls in her hair. “Commandant Guila, those gruesome stories might be a bit much for the princess there. She’s lived her whole childhood in a palace, you know?”

Walter grinned, and uncomfortable looks crossed the eyes of Guila and Baron Pollary. The Princess of Neah however, dressed in full military uniform, remained entirely composed.

The hint of a smile appeared on Cattlea Straumss’ lips. “Oh, don’t worry about me. I may have had a sheltered upbringing, but I understand the horrors and tragedies that can occur from time to time in war.”

“You may say that now, but this is a real battle we’re facing. This isn’t some story of heroic knights and princesses fit for discussion over afternoon tea, you understand?” said Bach.

Cattlea neatly placed her gloved hand to her mouth as she spoke. “My nation was invaded by Bakoss, as you well know. I have more than enough experience for a lifetime with oppression by the less-than-heroic knights.”

“Don’t get cocky, little girl!” He thumped the table, rising once more. “I hear you’re trying to come up with some scheme to wrench your country back from us. A mere result of the sudden death of the

Elite Five! If not, you would already be some pitiful trophy wife of Commander Civit! I don't even understand why you're here, speaking as if you represent Neah at all. I won't have it!"

After his outburst he simply glared at her, but her cool expression didn't crack. Cattlea hadn't even flinched when Bach's fist hit the table.

"Sir Bach, it appears there has been some kind of misunderstanding. I lost both my father and fiancée in quick succession. But you speak as if I was blessed to have suffered so? Do you imagine I do not grieve for Civit's death?"

"Y-you impudent little..."

"I believe Vicius-sama was the one who suggested that Neah's readmission to the Sacred Alliance would be based on their performance in this battle to come. If you are dissatisfied, I encourage you to send a magical war pigeon to the Goddess personally expressing your disapproval of her decision."

"D-do not distort my words! Of course I have no qualms with the Goddess' plan. But your attitude, Princess Cattlea... I simply meant to chide you for your insolence..."

Bach seemed to be struggling to get the words out, so Walter jumped in to help his floundering comrade.

"But we all have doubts about the strength of this *army* from Neah. When we invaded you didn't even put up a fight, did you? The head of your knights was a woman, I hear."

A vile smirk spread across Bach's face, sweat streaming down his forehead. "Come to think of it, she fled in disgrace before we even arrived, did she not? And she's currently believed to be dead?"

"Oh, Seras Ashrain?" Baron Pollary jumped in, who had been listening quietly, with interest. "I have a portrait of her in my mansion. It truly saddened me to hear of her death. But those clothes you sent me of hers, Princess Cattlea, I could still detect her sweet scent in the cloth."

"Oh? So you've gotten relic from Princess Cattlea as well, have you, Baron Pollary?"

"You too, Commandant Guila?"

"Indeed. Items of hers have simply exploded in value to the point of utter pricelessness. Nobody is willing to part with her possessions."

“But of course, the one we must truly thank is Princess Cattlea, who was closest to the Princess Knight herself. Thank you for releasing these precious treasures into the world. I offer you my deepest gratitude.”

Cattlea smiled gracefully.

“It pleases me to see you so happy.”

“I wish I could have shared a drink with her, while she still lived. It must be hard for you too, Princess Cattlea?”

“Not at all. Perhaps she was lucky to die as she did.”

“Eh?” Baron Pollary turned his head to the side in confusion.

Cattlea’s saying that even if she is still alive. Perhaps she’s lucky that everyone thinks she’s dead, thought Ayaka.

Bach glared at the princess arrogantly. “Tch! A little girl from a weak, tiny, insignificant country selling trinkets! In any case, the Bakossi army was so intimidating that even Seras Ashrain ran from us with her tail tucked between her legs! Listen to me, Commandant Guila! Allow the great and powerful Bakossi army to guard your citadel over the coming days, before we depart for the frontlines! We can send out the black dragons, if you wish!”

“Is your army not tired from the long march? I’m sure the Magnari soldiers stationed here can manage a little watch duty,” answered Guila.

“Preposterous! Our soldiers are no fragile flowers, exhausted by a day’s march!”

Bach leaned forward, shooting a look at the commander of the Alionese forces. “Baron Pollary! Please report to the Goddess that Bakoss humbly requests to take up the guard!”

Baron Pollary pulled back his chair a little, taken aback by how desperately Bach was entreating him.

“U-understood. I will inform Goddess Vicius of your dedication to our cause.”

Bach sat back down, looking satisfied with himself and glaring at Princess Cattlea triumphantly. A strange mood settled over the room—Guila was frantically looking from person to person, his eyes begging them to change the subject. Cattlea seemed to notice his panic.

“If, for example—we could cut across the Land of the Golden-eyed

Monsters itself, it would shorten our supply lines,” she suggested.

Baron Pollary scoffed at the idea, stroking his long, thin beard with his fingertips. “There is plenty of evidence in the history books that such a move is impossible. So long as the monsters do not try to escape, the area is best left alone. Normal horses cannot even maintain their sanity in that forest, to say nothing of the march it would involve. There are no safe paths. The heroes from another world were incapable of exterminating all the monsters that live there. Not even Vicius herself could defeat so many. The only way to make practical use of that place is to do as we have always done—provide the heroes with monsters along the outskirts to cause them to ‘level up,’ as it were.”

“According to certain sources, the leopardman of Monroy, and the Black Dragon Knight Slayers have fled there.” Guila said before downing the rest of his drink. “If those reports are true, then they are simply fools. That land holds naught but the promise of death. I’m sure that the Forbidden Witch is nothing but bones by now.”

“That was an ignorant proposal, Princess Cattlea,” Bach snorted, uncrossing his arms, and leaning back deep into his chair. “Utter nonsense. Voicing your childish pipe dreams in a place like this... I worry for your future, princess.”

MIMORI TOUKA

SERAS’ ARROW WHISTLED through the air as it found its target between the monster’s eyes. The beast stopped mid-leap, fell rolling to the ground and vanished into the brush. Then Eve’s flail came arching into the fight, its chain rattling, then pulling taut. The spiked ball smashed into a monster’s head and broke its neck. She used the momentum of her swing to deftly pull it back to her side. Despite the rough road ahead, Slei continued her charge through the forest of monsters.

A monster that looked like a huge hippo made a mad charge at us from the rear. Seras fired, but her arrow couldn’t make it through the creature’s thick skin.

“Paralyze.”

We left it behind in the dust, the great wheels of the war chariot rumbling heavy across the ground below.

Suddenly, there was a great commotion in the bushes behind, and a tree trunk came flying toward us, barely missing. It was followed by an ear-splitting roar, and a great horned gorilla shambled out from behind the trees. Its huge body was covered in gray fur; its eyes were golden. Its sadistic, deadly fangs gleamed and dripped with saliva.

That thing must be eight meters tall, at least.

A number of smaller gorillas accompanied the largest, gaining on us with incredible speed.

I don't think Paralyze can hit the smaller gorillas, but the biggest...

“Berserk.”

“Ghgaaarh!”

The huge beast roared as it turned, and then began to attack the smaller ones, who fell into confusion and disarray almost immediately. From ahead came a series of coarse cries. A few insect-type monsters which had been waiting up in the trees jumped out at Sleil, but Eve knocked them all away with her iron flail.

“Leave the small ones to me and Seras!” she called.

“All right!”

They came at us from all directions and we stood back to back, protecting each other on all sides. Seras fired off another arrow.

“Another group of larger ones! Sir Too-ka, I leave these to you!” Seras warned before jumping down to deal with a small purple oni that was hanging onto the handrail, drawing her sword in the air and piercing the creature’s head as she landed. It fell lifeless to the ground, bounced once high into the air, and was gone.

“Th-this smell!” groaned Seras, holding her nose. The oni’s blood was melting a part of the handrail.

“Hmm, should’ve expected there’d be some of these acidic guys in the northern parts!”

Two one-horned beasts with countless golden-eyes appeared before us, as if trying to pen us in. An unsettling smoke trailed from their lips.

They're out of range of my status effect skills.

With bursts of fire both monsters fired their horns at once, sending them spinning toward us like missiles.

They're trying to hit Sleil

I urged her to dodge, but Sleil was already swinging her own huge horns in reply. Her horns easily deflected the attacks, but the horned monsters immediately began to regenerate—a new horn rising from the holes in their foreheads where the old ones had been.

Seras and Eve didn't let them fire for a second time. Seras took one down with an arrow to the legs, sending it tumbling to the ground—the other one, Eve crushed to death with the weight of her iron ball.

Sleil suddenly lost balance. The whole chariot shook violently, and Eve was thrown into the air.

“Piggymaru!”

“Squee!” Piggymaru was already in rope form before I even ordered it, stretching toward Eve and grabbing her in mid-air.

All right...got her.

I crouched and steadied myself with the handrail, allowing Piggymaru to use me as an anchor as it brought Eve back to the chariot roof.

“Thanks, Too-ka.”

“Every time you fall, Piggymaru and I will pull you back in. So go nuts.”

Eve gripped her chains once more and got back on her feet. “Hmph, I'm counting on you.”

The clearest result of Piggymaru's second enhancement had been the slime's strength.

This little guy didn't used to be able to hold that much—only really enough to help me out a bit with climbing trees. But now Piggymaru's able to lift Eve, even with that heavy weapon she's holding. It takes a bit of arm strength on my part too, but with my stat modifiers I can manage it.

Piggymaru rushed to wrap back around my arm.

“Now you're so tough, I bet I could even swing around through the trees like a certain arachnid-inspired superhero, huh.”

We aren't currently linked so my skill range isn't any longer, but that

technique's only for when we really need it. It knocks Piggymaru out of action for a while afterward, so I have to be careful about when I use it. That goes for my Slow skill, too. Given the cooldown time and the amount of MP it uses, I can't go using that one lightly. It's reassuring to have two aces up my sleeve, though. We also have those magical devices that Erika gave us, and the weapons attached to the war chariot itself.

"I'm doing well enough against these guys with the usual status effect skills. Like Erika said, maybe I shouldn't overestimate them. We work well as a team, too."

"Sir Too-ka," Seras called out from behind me. There was an urgency in her voice. I felt the presence of new monsters approaching, and readied my skills to fire.

"Yeah, I know. We're going all the way!"

SOGOU AYAKA

IT WAS THE EARLY MORNING, and a deep fog had set in outside as the armies in their camps steadily made their preparations to depart. The heroes were busy getting ready, too. Sogou Ayaka was one of the first to step out of her room.

"Ayaka-chan." It was Minamino Moe, with the rest of Ayaka's group standing behind her.

"Looks like you're all ready then," Ayaka replied.

"Ehm, Ayaka-chan..." Moe looked to be struggling with the words.

"Go ahead, it's okay. I'm the class representative, you can ask me anything."

"You're getting demoted to B-class, and... It's all our fault, isn't it."

"Eh?"

"We've gotten in the way of your development, and we all decided the least we can do is apologize." Moe looked on the verge of tears. Ayaka just shook her head and smiled at her.

"It's not your fault. And well, if I was alone, I wouldn't have made

it this far anyway.”

I wouldn't have been able to bear it emotionally. The everyday life I had suddenly ripped away, replaced by this other world. I was so anxious, but I found my role here. I'm the class representative. I have to protect everyone.

“I decided to protect everyone. You all are the only reason I'm still here. So there's no need to say sorry, Minamino-san.”

“You've always been so kind, Ayaka-chan.”

Suou Kayako walked over and patted Moe on the shoulder. “We'll survive this battle for you, Sogou-san,” she said.

“Yeah. I'll try my best to just not get in your way. I'll do everything I can,” said Moe, wiping away her tears with a determined expression on her face.

Suddenly, a shrill, piercing scream echoed out over the hills.

“Eh? What was that?!”

It didn't come from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. It sounded closer, like it came from within the citadel walls.

Moe gingerly looked out of the window. “One of the black dragons, from those Bakoss people?”

“It can't be. Has the Demon Empire begun its attack?” Kayako asked Ayaka.

“No, their forces should still be somewhere near Shinad. I don't believe that's possible. If there were any large movements, surely the White Wolf King would have sent riders to inform us.”

But I can't discount that possibility. I don't know all of the enemy's movements, of course. They could have the ability to teleport large armies into battle.

Ayaka and Moe locked eyes.

“A-Ayaka-chan...what's happening?”

The ground beneath them began to tremble, and the citadel was suddenly a rush of activity as they poked their heads out of the window. The morning fog had cleared now, and they could see soldiers gathering on the southern wall.

That's the wall facing the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

“Let’s join them down there.”

They prepared for a fight, just in case. Angry, barked orders rang out through the citadel as they made their way. Even outside, the soldiers looked terrified by the noise. Moe looked around anxiously.

“Somebody said something about golden-eyed monsters in there. But they haven’t come near the citadel in a long time, have they? W-we’re going to be okay, aren’t we?”

Ayaka looked doubtful.

That great cry we just heard. Was that to lure monsters out of the forest?

Just as the fears were beginning to take shape in Ayaka’s mind, she heard someone call her name.

“Sogou-san.”

“Ah, Brown-san.”

Brown Angun, of the Four Holy Elders was a tall young man who wore glasses and reminded Ayaka somewhat of a priest. He didn’t stand out much in the shadow of his two older siblings, but both the younger two were said to be strong enough to defeat Abis if they teamed up together. Ayaka’s eyes began searching for Agit, but found only White Angun standing next to her brother and smiling at her.

“Our brother is still in the castle, I think. He’s speaking with Commandant Guila and Baron Pollary about the situation.”

The youngest sister of the Four Holy Elders had a kind air about her, and was always smiling. Ayaka always felt there was something superficial about the younger two, that they were somehow just keeping up appearances.

Just like their older siblings, these two aren’t normal. They’re still calm. They look terribly out of place in all this commotion.

“Oh?” Brown turned his head up to the sky. Black shadows swooped overhead, their dragon cries sending shockwaves through the crisp, clear morning air.

“The Black Dragon Knights!” One of the soldiers shouted, pointing up at them from his place on the crowded battlements. Several dragons flew out over the southern wall and, looking closer, Ayaka could see their riders, clad from head to toe in black armor with spears in their

hands.

“All this business with Neah. Seems Bakoss want the opportunity to prove themselves in battle,” said Brown.

“Brown-san, what’s happening out here? Could it be—”

“There are monsters gathering nearby. That odd scream just now must’ve been to draw them in.”

There was another faint tremor that seemed to linger.

They’re drawing closer, shaking the earth as they come.

“Dear me! It’s far too early in the morning for all of this!”

Commandant Guila came out into the yard, leading two groups of soldiers behind him. One group carried crossbows and the other held pikes. Before long the other heroes had joined them too.

“What the heck’s goin’ on?! Demon Empire attacking already? That’s the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, ain’t it? Hey, old man, I thought the monsters were s’posed to avoid this place? You con us, or what?!”

Guila clenched his fists and turned purple with anger at Oyamada’s disrespectful tone.

“What? Eh? Y-you gonna get mad? Gyah hah hah! What’s your boiling point anyway, room freakin’ temperature?!”

Yasu looked up sleepily at the citadel walls and yawned. “If this situation truly is worthy of my presence, so be it. Since becoming the strongest hero in this world, there have been so few monsters fit to face me. I have no equals—thus I have become truly *unequaled*. My, my, it’s such a burden to be so incredibly strong. How dull. How very dull.”

Guila frowned at the two A-class heroes’ attitudes, and began firing off orders to his crossbowmen. “Rain down bolts on them from the walls!”

The soldiers were already moving into position, and some were loosing their bolts from the battlements and guard towers.

“They can’t possibly break down our walls or gates, but we can’t allow those jumped-up monsters to roam free out there! Exterminate them! No mercy! Don’t let those Black Dragon Knights get the better of you! Show them what Magnar can really do!” he roared to the soldiers, spurring them to fight. “We don’t need to wake up those armies of the

other nations camping out in front of the north gate! Stand there and witness the power of my citadel, honorable heroes!”

“Commandant Guila! Should we strike out at them through the southern gate?!” suggested one of his subordinates. “The knights have been complaining lately that they have no opportunities to show their strength!”

“Oh, that’s right! Hm-hmph! Very well, send them out t—”

There was a sudden burst of screaming from atop the walls, a clamor that had been building for some time now. The rumbling coming from below the earth grew stronger.

There was a catastrophic cracking sound, and a part of the wall was blown away.

“Eh?”

A piece of stone was thrown from the wall by the force, and landed directly next to Guila, who stood frozen to the spot, transfixed by it. The subordinate he had been speaking to was crushed underneath, his blood and chunks of crushed flesh scattered in all directions.

“Nooo!” One of the girls in Ayaka’s group screamed, a terrified expression on her face.

“Wh-whoa...!”

A single soldier stood before the great crack in the broken wall, and took one step back. As he did so, a huge arm appeared, then another. Two gnarled hands gripped either side of the crack, and the creature pulled its head through into the citadel grounds.

A-a dragonfly...?

The head was that of a dragonfly, but from the neck down the monster was humanoid, just like a giant dragonfly man. The thing was covered with a thin layer of body fur, and its skin patterned like a dragonfly’s abdomen. Its head jerked about in unsettling motions.

Letting out a strange, high-pitched cry, the monster moved. It shot out its ten sharpened fingertips at the remaining soldiers on the wall.

“S-save m—! Gfhh!”

The dying screams of soldiers echoed through the citadel as the creature’s bladed fingertips mercilessly skewered them one by one, and

returned to its massive hands. Its ice-pick fingertips seemed to be connected to the hand by some kind of thread.

Guila dropped to his knees. “I-It can’t be... The pride of the White Citadel of Protection... Our wall...”

“Commandant Guila.”

He turned to see the two elder siblings of the Four Holy Elders and the Dragonslayer standing behind him.

“Ah, Agit... Dragonslayer... My wall... The monsters are...”

“Hurry and give orders to the soldiers still within the citadel,” said Agit, looking at the huge crack in the southern wall. “*They’re coming.*”

Monsters began pouring in through the opening, slaughtering any human soldier they could find. The door to the watchtower was smashed open, and the creatures massacred anyone they found in there too.

“Brown, White.”

On hearing their names called, the two younger Angun siblings rushed toward the watchtower, clearing a path through the monsters as they ran. Guila held his head in his hands, his eyes unfocused and filled with confusion.

“H-how?! How are there so many?! What is happening here?!”

“Commandant Guila, this is likely the work of the Demon Empire’s armies. I’ve been told that Ogre soldiers have been spotted in the citadel too.”

“I-Impossible! Ogre soldiers you say?! How did they get in?!”

“The night guard was set by a group of exhausted Bakossi soldiers. Not to mention the thick morning fog which fell on us at dawn. The guards were tired, and couldn’t see all that well. Conditions all too perfect for soldiers to sneak over our walls.”

“Who cares about the freakin’ when and why? They’re our enemies, yeah?!” Oyamada walked toward the advancing horde, winding up his right arm. “Would ya look at all that EXP? Is this a bonus stage or what? We s’posed to compete to see who can kill the most? Great chance to show all you freakin’ natives who were lookin’ down on us heroes some serious skills.”

“Black inferno, answer my call—Lævateinn.” Yasu’s arm was

wreathed in black flame. “I only hope that creature is worthy of the Hero of the Black Inferno. Now...to burn that giant dragonfly man to dust.”

“H-heroes!” Guila seemed to be regaining control of his faculties. “Th-that’s right... The heroes from another world are here! W-we have no less than three armies at our back as well! They may break our walls, but they can’t possibly defeat us! What was I, Guila Heidt, wailing about—*graaah!* Don’t let them get the better of you, sons of Magnar! We have nothing to fear from these past generations of monsters, long since cut off from the Demon King Essence. We’re going to bring them down! Call the wizards!”

This breathed new will into the soldiers, who quickly reformed their ranks right as the steadily rising flood of monsters began to reach them. Ayaka took one deep breath, readied her spear, and began to give orders.

“Can you all hear me?! Fight like Bane-san taught us, and we’ll make it through this! Get into position and ready your skills!” Her group formed up behind her.

“Y-yeah!”

“Let’s do it!”

“We’re going to fight! Survive! And make it back to the old world!”

“H-here they come!”

The horde drew closer. The first group were frogmen, about two meters tall with bladed scythes for arms. Ayaka kicked off against the ground, and launched herself forward, sliding across the ground and getting in close to them with a single leap.

“Geh, ghoob ghoob!”

Ayaka thrust her spear up through the monster’s jaw, and out through the back of its head. As she pulled it out, she used the momentum to sweep her weapon low and sent another sprawling to the ground.

“Gehh!”

She immediately pierced that one too, killing it instantly, but more of them moved to surround her.

“Ghoob geh!”

A greatsword cracked another monster’s head in two. The blade transformed into a raging whirlwind, cutting the monsters which had surrounded Ayaka to pieces.

“Bane-san!”

“Sorry I’m late.” The red-haired man lightly swung his greatsword to the ground to shake off the blood.

“Tch! Now that impostor S-class is stealin’ my kills?! Take that!” Oyamada dove headfirst into the horde. “Bullet—Gatling Mode!”

Balls of red energy began streaming from Oyamada’s fists, reducing everything caught in his fire to dust. The monsters kept coming though, fearlessly charging him down with the intent to kill.

“These guys are so motivated, it’s freakin’ hilarious! Moths to a flame! Bullet—Fortress Mode!”

The red balls of energy flew back toward him, and Oyamada absorbed them back into his body. In the next instant, he sent them all flying out again to kill nearby monsters, creating a mountain of corpses around him.

“C’mon, then! You lot gonna get your kills too or what?!” screamed Oyamada at the rest of Kirihara’s group as he crushed a dying monster underfoot slowly, toying with it. “Killing these jerks really makes you feel good! Like, freakin’ invincible! More we kill, the more they praise us—it’s awesome! Like, my morality’s totally breaking right now!”

A monster next to him suddenly exploded.

“Tsk tsk... You should know it’s gauche to enjoy a thing like killing, right?”

It was Abis—she had turned the creature into tiny lumps of flesh with just her fist. She continued to fight, grabbing hold of the charging monsters and indifferently twisting off their necks one by one.

“Shut up, chesticles! It’s just like Kirihara said, all you freakin’ natives are limited! We get stronger the more o’ these we kill! Got that? What’s wrong with me killin’ them all anyway?! You gonna explain it to me or what?! C’mon?!”

“Just shut up and kill.”

“Huh?”

Abis continued twisting off necks, so fast she was barely visible now. “Look, enjoy yourself. Kill, kill, kill. Kill all you like, to your heart’s freakin’ content. *Now’s the time for it.* I give you permission.”

“Tch! I don’t need your permission! Die already!”

Abis and Oyamada continued to fight, as if competing to see who could get the most kills.

Meanwhile, Yasu’s group fell into disarray when the monsters came for them—too busy arguing about who should be the first to charge into battle.

“H-hey! One of us should get out there!”

“Then you go first, why don’tcha?!”

“Wahh, they’re here!”

“Aaaahh! Help us, Yasu!”

Ayaka made to go and help them, but Banewolf stopped her.

“I’ll take care of them,” he said.

Yasu was some distance away from the rest of his group, cloaked in black flame.

“D-don’t ignore us, Yasu! Hey! Come help!”

“My, my...still referring to me as ‘Yasu’ are you. It appears you still do not understand your place in the hierarchy. Fools, fools. All of you.”

“P-please! No, I-I’m begging you, Yasu-san! Help us, please!”

“I suppose calling me *Yasu-sama* would be more appropriate... Very well. I will help you. Oh, the powerless are such miserable, pathetic creatures. They know only how to cling to the strong for their survival. *Muah hah hah!* Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic! The height of wretchedness, indeed! You lot are the pinnacle of it!”

Yasu sent out his black flames, consuming the monsters that were almost on top of the rest of his group, burning wider and stronger than they ever had before.

He placed a hand over his face in that well-practiced pose.

“But I am not yet satisfied. The reliance of the common folks means nothing to me any longer, my standards are higher now.”

He glanced over at Ayaka.

“She may be of a lower class than I, but I’d much rather the request for help would come from her. But it appears that I am unable to prove my true worth against any but the Demon King himself. That blasted Kiriwara... If only he were to fall to the Demon King in battle somehow.”

Banewolf stopped in his tracks.

“Looks like they’re doing fine then. Well, not sure if I can call that *fine*.” With a weak smile, Banewolf swung his greatsword up into the air, slicing a monster that lunged at him clean in two. “Stronger than the golden-eyes in most ruins maybe, but not so bad that our soldiers can’t handle them.”

The black dragons were circling above like giant vultures.

“Pfha ha hah! You crawling golden-eyed monsters are no match for the Black Dragon Knights! Witness our power!” cried Bach from above, atop his black dragon mount.

His knights then began attacking the giant dragonfly man with magic from outside the range of its sharp fingers, focusing their attacks on the creature’s head until it was nothing more than a bloody pulp. The creature chittered and screeched as it died.

Banewolf looked up at the broken wall while slicing through several monsters with his greatsword.

“That whole thing’s unstable now. Only a matter of time before it falls.”

Agit and Guila were nearby, fighting together to push back the horde.

“Wah hah hah! It was quite the scare when the wall came down, enough to make me completely forget how many skilled warriors we have stationed here!”

Agit smiled softly, cutting the monsters to pieces with his incredibly fast swordplay.

“Our army was originally to be led into battle by Vicius herself. To call us the elite forces of the Sacred Alliance wouldn’t be an overstatement. And hey, this older generation of monsters don’t even have the essence to weaken us with. The real fight’s going to be against the Demon Empire’s forces, when that one comes.”

“Hmm? Come to think of it Sir Agit, where are Baron Pollary and Princess Cattlea?” asked Guila.

“They’ve returned to their own camps I believe, as have the Elite Three, aside from Bach-san up there.”

“Hmph. I suppose they must take command of their own forces to avoid confusion in this mess.”

“Armies without a chain of command always risk total collapse, after all.”

“Hear, hear! Oh! The knights are finally here! This way, hurry! Teach those monsters a lesson!”

Guila was back on his feet, shouting orders to the knights that streamed past him into battle. Ayaka’s group took care of the monsters as they’d always done—sticking to their plan. The creatures kept coming, but it was clear the human side had an overwhelming advantage in strength.

The Goddess took Kirihara-kun with her to the east, but everyone here on the southern front is still so strong.

Ayaka used one of her skills—Blade Set—and a blade made of mana formed at the tip of her spear, turning it into more of a halberd.

Against this many enemies, I can take down more at once with a slashing weapon.

She sliced sideways in front of her, cutting five monsters apart with one swing.

This could even be a good chance for all of us to gain experience points, and level up before the final battle with whoever’s leading this southern invasion force.

Before she realized it, the monsters around her had all been cut down.

Guila continued to bark orders.

“Good work! We’re finished here! Let’s head to the wall, heroes! It’s time to counterattack! Everybody, charge!”

But aren’t there ogre soldiers somewhere within the wall? This attack...is there someone out there pulling the strings?

Ayaka froze.

Something's wrong.

She looked toward the broken wall. There was something going on over there. The Black Dragon Knights appeared to be retreating.

Just then, a heavy, thunderous footstep shook the earth below.

Everyone turned to look and one of the boys in Yasu's group dropped his sword and stood gaping.

"Wh-wha...what is that thing?"

The creature was shaped like a globe, the surface of it covered with countless black humanoid shapes from the waist up. Its huge, lumbering frame was black, supported by two thick legs. It towered over the dragonfly man.

Its cry sounded like the buzzing of an electrical arc. The eyes of the human bodies stuck arm to arm across its skin were hollow and vacant. There was another face, carved into the center of the creature's spherical body, crying. Suddenly one of the bodies moved, stretching out in a flash like a rubber band, then flying freer than any of the black dragons it now lunged toward.

The creature's hands closed around the black dragon mount—atop it sat Bach, of the Elite Three.

"What?! What are you doing?! L-Let go! You—"

Bach's dragon was ripped in half as more of the humanoid bodies swooped in to catch him. This foul mockery of the human form was expressionless and moaned as it captured the hapless knight.

"Save Sir Bach!"

The other Black Dragon Knights rushed to his aid, but more of the humanoids reached out to grasp at them, and they were quickly ensnared too. Bach struggled in the creature's giant hand.

"L-let me go! You monster! Let me—!" Bach screamed as he was grappled into the monster's enormous mouth. With a massive crunch, his head was bitten completely off.

The remaining Black Dragon Knights were consumed by the humanoids too—their leftovers dripping and splattering onto the ground below.

Next a huge lion with a human face burst through the citadel walls, opening another hole in the defenses. It crashed and floundered

in the dirt before getting back up on all fours and giving a fearsome roar, preparing to pounce.

“Wh-what the heck is that?! It’s so gross!” cried Murota Erii, turning pale.

The human-faced lion’s expression was twitching with fear. Its head was unusually large in proportion to its body, adding to the unsettling appearance of the beast. It looked unbalanced—as if its neck should already have snapped from the weight.

The creature roared again and Ayaka swallowed; her throat was dry.

Can it be? That’s a...

“The worst predictions always come true, eh?” Banewolf sighed, staring at the tragedy unfolding above the wall. “They’re here. Humanoid types.”

As if adding insult to injury, a horde of mid-sized monsters came rushing in through the crack that the human-faced lion had made.

“I get it. The first wave was made up of monsters from the outskirts. These guys are the elites, from deeper in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. Oof... Those humanoid types are gonna be tough for us to handle,” said Banewolf.

The human-faced lion turned toward Ayaka’s group and stood up on its hind legs.

“Ohbaahh!”

Is it intimidating us? A threat?

“That one’s locked on, ain’t it. Not even gonna give us a chance to run. Jeez, I’m not a fan of hard work.” Banewolf let the tip of his sword drop to the ground. “I’ll buy you some time. You guys retreat for now and join up with the armies north of the citadel. This place is probably done for. Take the command, Agit.”

“...All right. You pull back too, whenever you can, Dragonslayer,” replied Agit.

“Heh heh, I don’t want to die today, now do I? But heck, the size of that thing...” Banewolf’s eyes glowed red. “Well, better if I’m the one to do it.”

His body began to glow before their very eyes—to change...to

grow.

When the glowing stopped, a giant stood before them with the head and scales of a dragon. The burning-eyed dragonman let out a fearsome roar, more terrifying than even a black dragon, as if answering the monster's threat. It looked back, then immediately charged toward the citadel itself, reaching out for a pile of cargo covered by a massive cloth. From underneath he drew a sword so huge a human couldn't possibly have swung it.

I-Is that really Bane-san over there?

Did he predict this would happen, and have the soldiers bring that thing along with us?

Ayaka stood staring blankly at him.

"The power you gained from bathing in the blood of that dragon you slayed. I understand that maintaining that form eats away at your mind and memories. We are all grateful that you chose to unleash it for us in battle today, Banewolf the Dragonslayer," said Agit.

The dragonman held his sword aloft and turned to the humanoid types.

"Cool it with the explanations, give the freakin' order to retreat already, Agit."

"All right." Agit grabbed a riderless warhorse and gave the order to fall back, which the soldiers quickly followed. Guila should've been the one leading them, but he was in no fit state to command. At the urging of his soldiers, he was desperately trying to get back onto his horse.

The human-faced lion fixed eyes on the dragonslayer, roared once more, and pounced. He crouched in response, raising his sword above his head.

Moe started to pull at Ayaka's arm. "A-Ayaka-chan! We have to go!"

"Y-yes! But Bane-san...!" The giant's movements stopped for just a moment. She shouted to him. "Please, be careful! There's still so much you have to teach us!"

He nodded, ever so faintly.

"Let's go, Minamino-san!"

“Yeah!”

Several monsters broke off from the horde and gave chase.

“I’ll guard the rear! Keep running!” shouted Ayaka, ushering the other students behind her.

“Huh?! What the heck, just when we finally get to face some humanoid types?! I ain’t runnin’! What’s the point in us heroes if we don’t even fight? This is so lame!” cried Oyamada.

“Shut your mouth, will ya?! We’re countin’ on you against the ones that give off that Demon King Essence stuff! We can handle any of these guys that don’t! And listen! Vicius is gonna freakin’ kill us if we let any of you die against these humanoid types! Get that through your thick skull, Oyamada!”

Yasu rode right behind Oyamada as Abis shouted at him, seeming to have secured a stray horse.

“Hmh, what’s with that dragon transformation anyway? Such a foolish power. Well, if the humanoid types are on a level with *that*, the Hero of the Black Inferno should hardly be necessary here.”

“But why have the monsters come? Why now, after all these years out there in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters?” Agit mumbled to himself. “I can only think that noise must’ve had some kind of effect upon them.”

He looked back to see Banewolf was still fighting. There were still friendly soldiers near the wall, and he was steadily moving through the horde to rescue them. The ever-increasing swell of monsters swarmed around him, and the dragonman roared as he waded into the crowd. Ayaka tried to follow, but was cut off by a number of faster monsters blocking her path. She looked in his direction, silently cheering him on.

Good luck, Bane-san!

The Dragonslayer swung his huge sword, driving the monsters away from him, but they just kept coming. He no longer knew if the soldiers he had been going to save were still alive. The crying-faced sphere sent its black humanoids down to attack Banewolf in unison.

At the same time, the human-faced lion leaped, unleashing an unsettling, guttural cry just before it closed its fangs on his arm.

“It can’t be...” Ayaka couldn’t believe her eyes.

Another huge humanoid monster rose up behind Banewolf, leading a bunch of big monsters behind it. Despair filled Ayaka's heart. Banewolf was pinned in on three sides by the humanoid types—Ayaka could barely even see him any more.

He doesn't have anywhere left to run!

"A-Agit-san! Bane-san is going to—!" Ayaka called out with everything she had to Agit, who had the command. He turned to face her, when a low-pitched, potent roar echoed out over the battlefield, but it wasn't from Banewolf's direction.

"W-was that a monster?! Where did that voice come from?!"

The nearby soldiers looked left and right, trying to find the source of the noise. Moe was the first to realize it.

"Agit-san! U-up there...!"

"What?"

The monster flew through the sky above them by spinning, like some gymnast twisting itself through the air. It was shaped like a massive humanoid, made up of countless smaller limbs.

"What is that thing?!"

"From the way it's moving, that thing isn't flying. It just leaped into the air," noted Agit. Ayaka could only point up into the sky, the color draining from her face.

"Agit-san... Those things on its body, are they...?"

"Yeah," he nodded, sounding as if he didn't want to believe it either. "Those are other monsters catching a ride over the wall."

Ayaka had thought *they* were a part of it, but she was wrong. There were a terrifying number of other monsters, lined up side by side clinging to the humanoid type.

Suddenly there was a great whooshing sound as a white beam of light shot across the sky, and the monster's right arm was burned off as it spun through the air—along with all the monsters that had been stuck to it.

"Uaaahh?!" The giant monster let out a harsh, grating scream of pain.

"...the Divine Eye," muttered Agit.

The anti-air weapon of Yonato, the Divine Eye can even reach us all the way out here.

“I see. It jumped too high, so only its right arm was in range.”

But the creature was still alive, as were all of the monsters clinging to the other parts of its body. Blue blood spurted from the nub where its arm had once been. With a violent thump the monster crashed down onto the earth, anger in its eyes.

“It can’t be!” Guila’s horse neighed at him and stopped dead in its tracks as he tried to retreat with all the others in his vanguard. He looked slowly upward.

“Urah, uraaah!”

The fourth humanoid type stood in their path, countless monsters crawling all over it.

THE INNER CIRCLE

A CHANGE CAME over the Aisne River that day, which flowed through the flatlands north of the citadel where the three nation army had made their camps.

“Gih, Gihgih...”

Ogre soldiers poked their heads up from the surface of the river, and several crawled out onto the banks.

Next came a giant demon with the head of a goat, sending up a great column of water into the air which then showered back down onto the creature’s purple fur. It walked on two legs, with four sinister horns atop its head.

The Second of the Sworn—Zweigseed.

Zweigseed was the second most powerful demon of the Inner Circle whose strength rivaled even that of the Demon King himself. He looked toward the White Citadel of Protection, which had fallen into panic at the golden-eyed monster attack, just as planned. Reveling in the chaos, he ripped his great claws across his own chest.

His blood poured down his chest, raw flesh visible beneath his

torn fur.

“Harvest.”

The ogre soldiers rose up from the river behind Zweigseed one by one.

“Let us go. Cut down these humans; grant them no dignity.”

SOGOU AYAKA

THE HUMANOID TYPE that stood in their path swung its one remaining arm, sending the monsters clinging to it flying toward the heroes. The monsters spread high up into the air like a swarm of locusts, terrifying in number. Some soldiers tried to run, others just stood and stared, and still more took up their arms to fight. Their lines fell into confusion and disarray almost immediately.

“Everyone, hold ranks!” shouted Ayaka, swiping monsters away as they tried to surround her.

There were a mix of smaller and mid-sized creatures, but the mid-sized all stood at least two meters tall and were raging out of control. The whole area was choked with dust, making it hard to see what was happening. Mercifully, Ayaka’s group were able to stay together as a unit, and formed up back to back in a circle, with the heroes who were best at support skills protected in the center.

Good, we’re still together.

Ayaka raced around, circling her group and killing monsters as she went.

“Ayaka-chan!” Moe called out, holding her sword in both hands.

“I’m okay! Just worry about protecting yourselves! Leave the more dangerous ones to me!” Ayaka plunged her spear deep into a big monster’s leg, and used her specialist skill Inner Bomb.

The monster’s leg exploded from the inside with a bang, and it dropped to the earth. Ayaka leaped gracefully over and gave the creature another Inner Bomb to the head, finishing it off.

She took a deep breath, listening to the panicked screams and

angry roars that surrounded her on all sides. They were all she could hear now in the chaos.

Where are the other groups?!

She had no idea where Kirihara or Yasu's group were any more.

That huge creature with all the limbs stuck to it...where is that thing?! I need to be careful of the humanoid types, but I don't even know where it is. Did I lose sight of it in the dust? No, that thing was massive, it should still be casting a shadow. I should still hear it moving around.

"Sogou."

"Ah, Abis-san!"

Abis gave her a wide, wicked smile, her eyes brimming with aggression. She was holding half a monster, ripped off at the torso, dragging it behind her by the head. Judging by the state of the corpse, she'd been using it as a shield.

"Just kill every monster you see! Whichever ones are closest!"

"Abis-san, behind you!"

"I know, jeez." She punched a fist out behind her without even turning her head. The monster which had leaped at her burst like a water balloon in mid-air. "Come on, then! Run at me however you like, you freakin' golden-eyes!"

Ayaka tried to catch her breath, desperately keeping the monsters away, even as their ranks showed no sign of thinning.

Abis-san's amazing... She's on another level.

Abis' right arm was soaked blood-red—not from the monsters she killed—her arm itself appeared to have changed color. It was bigger than her left, and shaped differently now.

What's happening to her arm? Does she have some special power?

To Ayaka, it clearly looked as if she was beyond a normal human now. The monsters around her seemed somewhat scared of this new, mysterious aura their enemy was giving off.

"Aaargh! I didn't wait all this time for some prey, only to let you freakin' take it from me!" Oyamada appeared screaming from the dust cloud, firing off his unique skill.

"Oh? Lively as always, eh? That's the only thing I like about you,

Oyamada!”

“Shut up, freakin’ Abis! Shut up and leave me my prey! Grraaah!”

He closed in on her, slaughtering monsters as he came, until the two of them were together—standing back to back.

“Abis! I’ll watch your back, so you send all the prey in my direction! I’m gonna kill, and kill and...make you cry someday! You ain’t got a freakin’ weakness, do you? If that won’t work, I’ll just have ta use raw strength to force you to the freakin’ ground!”

“Oya—” Ayaka began to call out to him, but he didn’t hear.

“I’m always tellin’ you!” goaded Oyamada, building up red balls of energy in his hands. “You Four Holy Elders have already hit your freakin’ limit, and we heroes are just getting star—”

He turned around.

“—ted?”

Abis was still standing behind him—but only from the waist down.

“Huh?”

Oyamada looked up slowly, his expression blank.

“*Munch, crunch, rip... Anhf...*”

Something dropped to the ground by his side, severed by the perfect teeth that loomed above him.

“Wah—”

A blood red arm—the same one that had been ripping monsters limb from limb just moments ago.

“Waaah!” Oyamada screamed. “Wah, waaah! Wahh! Wahhh?!”

“N-no!”

Ayaka felt all the blood rushing from her cheeks.

When did it appear?

The monster feeding before Oyamada was the humanoid type made up of monster limbs. Its face twisted in rage.

Come to think of it, I didn’t see that thing... Even with the dust cloud, I should never have lost sight of it. It’s strange, but can that humanoid type change its size at will?

“Urrooaaah!”

With a great creaking sound, a terrifying number of limbs burst out from inside the creature’s body. It swelled even larger, and regrew the arm it had lost to the Divine Eye.

When the monster was about twenty meters tall, it thrust both grasping hands toward the screaming Oyamada.

“Orrooh!”

“Waaah! Waah! Waaah!”

“Oyamada-kun, run!” she called out to him, but it was all Ayaka could do to keep clearing out the monsters as they lunged for her.

If I leave here, it’ll put my group in danger. No! I have to kill more of these monsters!

If anything, their number was multiplying. Some of those that had been shaken from the humanoid type were only just now joining the fight. Ayaka searched for Yasu and Agit in the crowd.

“Agit-san, Yasu-kun! Answer me if you can hear! Oyamada-kun is —”

“B-Bullet! Bullet, Bullet, Bullet, Bullet, Bullet!”

Oyamada fired off his base skill over and over wildly into the horde, as if he’d completely forgotten about his upgraded ones.

“Uhh?! Gh?! Gh?!”

The face of rage was knocked back a tiny amount, as if pummeled by invisible fists. Some of the limbs making up the monster’s face were ripped off and blown away, but it showed no signs of caring.

“Gyaaahh, it ain’t workiinn?! Waahh?! If Abis couldn’t kill it, we’re freakin’ done for! It’s over! Aah! Waaah! Waah!”

Oyamada turned his back to the humanoid monster and ran.

“O-Oyamada-kun?!”

“Waaah, I don’t wanna dieeee! Aah!” He stopped, as if struck by lightning—standing there open-mouthed, arms hanging limp at his sides. He suddenly set off running again, not even looking where he was going.

“Help meee! Waaah! Die! Ghhaa-! Mamaaa! I’m scared! Aaah! Gah!”

“O-Oyamada-kun...”

Is he losing his mind?

He charged across the earth, wet with blood, and disappeared into the dust. Some in Ayaka’s group stood blankly staring after him. Ayaka quickly regained control of her breathing, thinking hard about what to do next.

I need to find some way to get that humanoid to focus its attacks on me! I don’t know how to defeat it, but I need to protect everyone in my group.

Suddenly, a great explosion shook the battlefield just as the humanoid type made to move once more. It sounded like an offensive magical attack—a direct hit.

The monster roared, and leaped in the direction the attack had come from, twisting and spinning through the air as it had when it first appeared.

Whose attack was that? It saved us. Ah, but Oyamada-kun...

Ayaka knew she should follow him—he was in no condition to fight—but she couldn’t leave her group either. They couldn’t move and it took everything they had just to stay in formation. Ayaka stared out into the dust Oyamada had disappeared into with a remorseful look on her face.

Abis was stronger than him and he’d never expected that she might die. Much as he cursed her, to him she represented what it meant to be strong. Someone to overcome one day, but someone still so far away. She was devoured, right before his eyes. Not to mention he came face to face with that humanoid type...they were so close.

Ayaka had felt a terrible dread wash over her when she first saw the creature, too. A pressure like nothing she’d ever felt before. Even from afar, it had struck an ominous sense of doom into her very heart.

Bane-san?

She looked uneasily to the south, where Banewolf was facing off against the other three humanoid monsters.

I wonder what’s happening at the wall right now?

“Sogou!”

That voice, it’s—

“Brown-san?! Thank goodness you’re safe!” She shouted as the youngest son of the Four Holy Elders came walking toward her. “Ah...”

He was missing an arm—it was tied off with a belt just below the shoulder to stop the bleeding. He used attacks from his magical devices to kill enemies as he approached.

I should’ve known. He’s a member of the Four Holy Elders. It doesn’t even look as if he’s struggling—he’s not out of the fight yet. Brown was over near the wall, wasn’t he? Maybe he knows how Banewolf is doing.

He opened his mouth and called out to her.

“Sogou, where are my brothers and—*whoosh!*—ters?!”

A thin red line ran under his nose, stretching across his face from ear to ear. The line slid, disconnecting the two halves—.

“Huh?”

Brown’s head was split in half. His body crumpled to the ground with a sickening splat.

A girl in Ayaka’s group began screaming.

“N-nooo!”

A chill ran down her spine, a cold sweat forming on her cheeks. All the warmth had fled Ayaka’s body.

“B-Brown-s-san!”

She saw something glimmering some way behind him, catching the sunlight.

Is that what decapitated Brown? Some kind of thread? It’s so sharp!

“Bheh heh heh!” A monster which looked like a weasel walking upright on its back legs emerged from the dust. The thread-weasel’s eyes were creased, as if it were mocking them.

That monster...did it let Brown-san get away just so it could kill him like that in front of us?

The creature walked past Brown-san’s corpse and advanced toward them.

“Ayaka-chan! It’s coming right this way?!”

“Everyone, long-distance combat skills!” ordered Kayako, and the group sent out a volley of attack skills. The thread-weasel didn’t even flinch as they made contact.

Ayaka clenched her teeth, holding in the terror.

“Leave it to me.” She quickly calculated the distance between them and readied her footing.

I have to decide quickly. Judging by the light and the movements of the dust—there are two of those threads.

Calm down. Don’t panic.

Can I really do this?

I can’t help thinking my reflexes are going to be too slow. Can’t help thinking that thing is faster than me. Yasu or Oyamada with their long-distance attacks would be a better match for this creature.

“Heh. Heh. Heh?!”

The thread-weasel was suddenly engulfed in black flame. Charred black, it fell smoldering onto its back in the dirt, unmoving.

“I think I heard Oyamada’s filthy wailing a few moments ago... What happened, Ayaka?”

Yasu Tomohiro appeared on his horse, and Ayaka explained the situation to him.

“Pff...Oyamada Shougo, the delicate flower! Delicate! Frail! *Muah hah hah!* Nobody can be a true champion without both the physical and mental strength to match! He was simply playing at being a hero, head in the clouds, that’s all! Ah, how happy it makes me feel! Exhilarating! The true avatar of a hero was me, Yasu Tomohiro, after all!”

He spread his flaming wings, laughing loudly as black feathers of flame shot from them like bullets toward the monsters around him. Anything struck by the feathers was immediately consumed by flames.

“Yasu-san, please, wait!”

His group appeared from the dust, following some way behind him.

“Oh, the underlings are finally here? You took your time, servants.”

“S-servants?”

“Did I really have to say it?”

“Y-you’re right, of course. It’s just...we can’t ride horses like you can. If you could only slow down to let us catch up...”

“Allow me to ask: Is it a sin to be fast?”

“Eh?”

“No! It’s a sin to be slow, in fact! If you want the Hero of the Black Inferno’s help, then follow as if your lives depended on it! You aren’t desperate enough, that’s the problem! Keep walking through life with those fragile, Oyamada-like minds of yours and this dog-eat-dog world will eat you up!”

“Wh-what happened to Oyamada?”

Yasu swept his right hand to the side, striking another of his favorite poses before answering—and in the same instant, Ayaka moved instinctively.

“Hmph, listen and be amazed. Oyamada has—” *Slice*. “Eh?”

Three of the fingers on his hand were severed, and their stumps began gushing blood.

“Huh?!”

“Bheh, heh, heeh.” It was the thread-weasel from earlier.

So it wasn’t dead...or did it come back to life?

The creature had been on its back, charred and showing no sign that it was breathing. Everybody had thought that it was dead.

“Ghhaaah?! My fingers?! My fingers!”

Having made its final counterattack, the weasel found itself skewered on the end of Ayaka’s spear, straight through the heart. It was too close to Yasu for her to react sooner, but she’d moved to pierce the monster the moment she sensed its murderous attention was drawn elsewhere. A thin trickle of blood dripped down her arm where the weasel had tried to strike her, too late.

If this creature wasn’t already weakened by Yasu’s flames, that might’ve been it for me.

He rolled off his saddle and dropped down into the dirt.

“Gyaaah?! Where are my fingers?! My fingers!”

He frantically began searching for them.

“I-I have to get them healed! Pick them up... They must be reattached! The Goddess will...! Oh, *fuck*! Why?! Why’d this have to happen to me?!”

Ayaka was back into action immediately, drowning the monsters around her in a sea of blood. In turn, they refused to give her even a second's respite. There were more of them than ever.

They must be pouring in through the south gate. There are too many of them.

"Yaku-san, calm down! Someone in our group with healing skills can—"

"I found them!" He shouted. "Retreat, Ayakaaa!"

He wrapped his severed fingers in a cloth and placed them in his bag, climbing back up onto his horse and clutching at them as he spurred his horse forward.

"A-all right! Everyone, stay in formation! Yasu-kun and I will protect you as we move to the north gate, and—"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Eh?"

Gripping the reins with one hand, Yasu screamed down at her, his eyes wide. "What are you thinking?! There's no need for us to protect them in these circumstances! No, it's *they* who should be trying all they can to ensure that *I* make it out alive!"

"Yasu-kun? Wh-what are you saying?"

He burned a nearby monster to dust with Lævateinn.

He can still fight! So why...?

"Think about it! What'll we do if Kiri-hara and the Takao sisters are defeated in the east?! Oyamada's definitely gonna bite it here too... And you're a mere B-class, Ayaka! I could be the only hope this world has left! Think about how much room I still have to grow! The elites *have to* survive, no matter how you look at it!" Yasu rattled off his justifications.

Ayaka couldn't understand the logic of what he was saying. One of the boys in Yasu's group screamed up at him, panic in his eyes.

"What are you saying, Yasu-san?! You said you'd protect us once we showed we truly respected you!"

"Do you know why this had to happen?! Because there's no point in you surviving! It would be meaningless! You have to direct all your effort to making sure I stay alive! I have no time to protect you now!"

Why don't you understand that?!"

"Yasu-kun! We should all work together to—"

"*Shut up!* Shut up! Shut up! No B-class has the right to order an A-class like me! Enough! There's no sense in talking to you simple-minded losers any more! Retreat! Retreat!" Yasu kicked his horse in the side and spurred it onward. "But this isn't a defeat for me! It's...yes! A tactical retreat! I have to live...for the Goddess! For this whole world! I must survive!"

Yasu's group began to cry and moan resentfully.

"Curse you, Yasu! We need an A-class to survive out here! Please! Help us! Please!"

"Wait, Yasu-kun! Please, we need your strength!"

Ayaka tried her utmost to stop him too, calling out as he rode away, but in the midst of battle all she could manage were a few desperate cries.

"Yasu-kun! Please!"

"I must survive!" He shouted back at them, burning the monsters which tried to follow him with his flames and disappearing off into the dust.

"It's over! We're done for!" screamed Nihei Yukitaka, one of the boys in Yasu's group. The others fell into terrified panic as well, as if by chain reaction.

"I don't want to die! Someone, wake me up from this nightmare. Wake me up!"

"I want to go home!" Nihei dropped his sword, his face wet with tears.

"Save us! Save us, class rep! We'll do anything you say. I never thought the enemies would be this strong. We have so many strong warriors on our side, and...I always thought if we were attacked, someone else would defeat the monsters for me. I thought that they would save me..."

The other members of Yasu's group started crying out for help as well.

"Save us, class rep! Help us escape!"

"Help us, please! Ayaka-sama!"

Ayaka called back to them in an almost scolding tone, as she slaughtered yet another monster.

“Nihei-kun! The rest of you!” She had never been able to speak so harshly back in the old world. “If you want to survive, then group up in a circle and hold position!”

“G-group up?”

“Bane-san taught you how, didn’t he?!”

“Banewolf-san...?”

“He taught you how to fight in a way that matches your hero class! How to survive together, by helping each other!”

Yasu’s group was given the same training that ours was. They should be able to use some of the same techniques.

“Focus on working together with our group and staying alive! Anyone good with healing skills, get in the center! Support skills, form up in the circle around them! If you have attack or defensive skills, reinforce those by fighting on the outer ring! Get the injured into the circle, fast! Suou-san!”

“Yes!” It was Kayako’s voice—quiet but strong. Ayaka turned to her, covered in sweat.

“When I can’t give commands, you take charge,” she said.

It wasn’t a request—it was an order. Kayako’s usually soft expression hardened with determination.

“I’ll take command.”

Ayaka nodded, feeling reassured by her reaction.

“If any monster you can’t handle comes your way, call out to me!”

“Understood!”

Ayaka’s group fought their way over to join up with Yasu’s.

“A-Ayaka-chan...” Moe looked worried.

Ayaka glanced over at her—and smiled. “It’s okay. I’ll protect you. I’ll protect everyone.”

Nihei called out to her, picking up his fallen sword. “I-I’m sorry! Who cares about what the Goddess thinks, I should’ve joined your group right from the start! I’m sorry, class rep.”

“Nihei-kun, *just fight!* Fight so we can all make it through this alive!”

“Ah, aah... Waaahh!”

He slashed out at a monster which was closing in on him, but as that one fell, another jumped out right behind it.

“L-Leave it to me!” Moe, who was assigned to defense, jumped out with her shield and blocked the monster’s attack. “Uhn!”

She was blown backward by the impact—a boy in the row behind stepped out to catch her.

“N-Nihei-kun, slash it!” Moe screamed with all her might.

Nihei swung his sword with desperation written all over his face. He traced the blade down from the monster’s shoulder, ripping the flesh across its torso—but it wasn’t enough. It roared once more with bloodthirsty rage, glaring at Nihei with a murderous intent so palpable, it was terrifying to behold.

“Grraaah!”

“Ah...n-no, I didn’t mean to! My hand slipped, and it was a mistake!” Nihei fell backward onto the ground in terror. Three heroes rose up behind him to help.

“L-let’s go! We’ve gotta save Nihei-kun!”

“Kill it!”

“Waaah!” Realizing they were there to help him, Nihei slashed out desperately at the creature’s ankles from his sitting position.

The monster lost its balance and collapsed to the ground. The three heroes jumped on it, surrounding the monster and stabbing it full of holes.

“Die! Die, die, *die!* Die already!”

“Go to hell!”

“Die, please! Please just die! Die!”

It certainly wasn’t the way the elite heroes fought—it was too messy and crude for that. The monster raised its arms into the air to try to resist as the heroes ganged up on it, but it was no use.

“W-we did it... We did it!”

“If it’s dead, come back into the circle, quickly!” called Kayako.

“R-right!”

The heroes returned to the group, exhausted, and Ayaka did a little fist pump in her mind.

Maybe it's just because we all learned from the same teacher, but that went well. There were support skills from the group that added to that attack just now too—everyone's doing what they should. But anything could change, at any moment. What they need to see right now is hope. The hope that we can survive this ordeal. I have to keep showing it to them. To create that hope inside myself.

“I...I leveled up!” The hero who had just delivered the killing blow raised his voice.

Leveling up... That's it!

“If you've leveled up recently, give the killing blows to anyone who hasn't! When you level up it refills your MP, so it'll let us use our skills more freely! Everyone, check your MP from time to time—give whoever has the lowest a killing blow!” ordered Ayaka, splitting a monster's skull in half.

Even heroes run out of MP eventually. But if we level up, we can all keep using our skills.

“Leveling up will increase your other stat modifiers! It'll give us the edge in this battle! If you see a chance to level up, grab it! We're heroes—we get stronger the more we fight!”

The most important thing now is for me to keep them motivated!

“We're going to fight our way to survival!” Ayaka screamed with all her might.

Nihei was back on his feet, holding his sword again.

“W-we're gonna do this... We're gonna do this! We're really gonna make it!”

“Sogou-san!” Kayako called.

“Leave it to me!”

Ayaka leaped over to her, killing a mid-sized monster with her specialist skill.

Kayako made the right call. That probably was an enemy they couldn't have faced on their own. They're determining which monsters they're capable of killing on their own.

But the monsters just kept coming, and Ayaka had the feeling she now had fewer allies on the battlefield than ever before. The voices and cries of the human side were being steadily drowned out by the roars of their opponents.

The monsters are winning. At this rate they're eventually going to wear us down.

"Ooohhh... Oooooohhh!" The face of rage howled.

But it sounds far away. Someone out there is facing off against it.

What do I do? Should we try to join up with the armies outside the north gate of the citadel? With the mood the group is in now, we might just be able to make it.

"Everyone, I think we should move slowly toward the north gate! If we stay here, we'll be surrounded and won't be able to get away!"

"R-right! Let's go!" agreed Nihei.

But now the dust cloud had started to clear, and they saw what stood in their path.

A wall of monsters.

They were horned, and they looked almost like the oni of Japanese folklore.

Their skin was a coppery, reddish brown, and they had long white beards, scraggly and curled. Their cruel golden eyes had Ayaka fixed firmly in their sights, and they raised their chins as if mocking the heroes, looking down their noses at her.

Ayaka sensed their strength immediately. The oni all appeared to be in formation, like a trained military unit.

Fear ran through the group once more, and they stole glances at the oni as they fought. One of them was holding a human head aloft, clutching it by the hair and dangling it like a trophy. Looking closer, Ayaka could see that the color of their skin wasn't the only thing covering them in red. Corpses lay in heaps, piled high around them.

The oni that stood in front of the wall with its arms crossed—the only one with two horns—let out a strange wail, never taking its eyes off of Ayaka.

"Uhbaaah!"

It was the signal to attack. The oni all cried in response, then

charged.

“A-Aya-Ayaka-chan!”

“Leave it to me!”

She sprinted toward them alone, thrusting her spear with lightning speed at the two-horned oni’s face.

It dodged my attack?!

The oni’s reflexes were incredible—it was fast, too. Ayaka was quickly surrounded. She swung her halberd, the mana blade at the tip of her spear at the monsters, but they dodged her every attack.

“What?!”

The oni’s great claws lunged for her, and she couldn’t get out of the way in time. She heard the sound of cloth ripping and felt a sharp pain in her side.

No! If these monsters reach everyone, then...!

Nihei raised his sword, and called out to the group. “The class rep’s in trouble! Let’s go save her!”

“No, don’t! These monsters are—” Kayako had a hand on Nihei’s shoulder pulling him back before Ayaka could even finish.

“S-Suou?”

She shook her head at him. “Only Sogou-san can face monsters like those. We have to focus on protecting ourselves.”

“Su-ou...?” Nihei was in shock. Kayako was usually so reserved and emotionless—but now her face was twisted up with sadness. She realized that maybe not even Ayaka was capable of defeating the monsters they now faced.

“R—!” Ayaka tried to call out to them, but she wasn’t capable of finishing the thought.

Run? Run where? Should they try to make it to the north gate on their own?

Several oni had gotten past her, and were now surrounding Ayaka’s group, intimidating them with their battle cries. The circle of heroes shrunk as the oni advanced, until they had nowhere left to retreat to.

“Everyone!”

Ayaka desperately swung at the oni around her, but none of her attacks made contact.

I'm not fast enough!

A dark despair fell upon all of the heroes' faces, but Ayaka couldn't land a single hit. Their hope was nothing in the face of these monsters. An oni stepped forward, slashing at the circle. The creature's claws missed—as it intended them to.

They're playing with them... Enjoying the way they're reacting.

Another oni stared into Ayaka's face.

"How 'bout that then? Despairing yet?" it seemed to say.

Ayaka swung at the monsters, in the depths of her rage and despair. But her attacks still did nothing.

"Ayaka-chan!" screamed Minamino Moe. "Don't push yourself! Just focus on protecting yourself! Please!"

She's usually so scared, but now she isn't asking me to save her. She's thinking about my safety instead.

"D-defensive positions!" someone shouted.

"Hold! Hold, hold, hold!" cried Nihei. "Class rep can't fight at her best if she's worrying about us! So we...we have to protect ourselves!"

It's not that. It's that I'm not strong enough—not enough to defeat these oni.

To make matters worse, there were other monsters surrounding the circle too—mid-sized and larger ones mixed in with the horde.

They must've finally run out of other targets to prey upon...

It was all Ayaka could do to defend herself. She couldn't reach her comrades. Her vision blurred.

But even now, they believe in me... They're still willing to fight.

I swore to protect them.

Would all this have been different if I had my own unique skill?

Would I have been able to protect them if I had some powerful ability on my side?

No. I won't cling to that. Nothing impossible, no daydreams, only my own 'oni'... My Kisou style.

I will put my faith in the possible.

It must have been almost three years ago now.

“The Kisou-style forbidden technique, you say?”

Ayaka sat with her grandmother in the dojo of the Sogou family mansion. It was after their training, and the golden rays of the evening sun poured in through the open doors.

“Let me predict how you’ll react... You’re going to say all this sounds stupid, aren’t you, Ayaka?”

“Because it’s a technique so dangerous, it was forbidden, you mean?”

“Yes. Nobody in their right mind would try it,” said her grandmother, before going on to explain in detail. “The theory behind it is simple. You push your body past its limits. You must make it do things that a normal human would consider impossible, out at the very edge of human potential.”

She pointed her index finger at Ayaka. “First, picture a single, strong length of thread. Then let it in. Let it flow all through your body. Whenever you move, let that thread do the work. Allow yourself to be pulled by it, and try doing something you’d normally consider impossible. So long as your body can keep up, this technique allows humans to move like monsters on the battlefield.”

“Like some kind of marionette, you mean?”

“That might be a useful way to think of it. To be honest, I don’t know why it is possible. It could just be another way of manipulating the chi from your breathing exercises. I tried it myself once, but...I didn’t understand it well. Ended up breaking some bones and haven’t attempted it again since.”

“Did Kisou style masters use this technique in the past?”

“So it’s said. If we go right back to the origin...” Ayaka’s grandmother put a cigarette in her mouth and struck it with a match. She shook the match to extinguish it, and took a drag before continuing. “The term *kisou* means *to bury the oni*. The technique was created to

protect villages from the oni they could not defeat without it. Someone from the shogunate took an interest in the style and it grew in popularity as a secret martial art.”

“To bury the oni...”

“It’s a breakaway style based on some long lost fairytale. It’s said that it was brought in from the outside—some nameless style. It’s just...”

“What is it?”

“Its effect on the human body is so great, normal humans can break under the pressure. Something funny about that?”

With a slight giggle, Ayaka replied, “Ah, I’m sorry. But talking about a forbidden technique from an ancient martial art... It almost sounds like a story out of some adventure novel.”

“Well, at the end of the day, it’s only a legend, filled with anecdotes and exaggerations now. This technique will put so much stress on you that, unless your body isn’t perfectly trained, it’ll break apart. It’s not something any normal high-schooler could pull off.”

“When you tell me it’s impossible, it just makes me want to try, Grandmother.”

“If you’re interested, I’ll give you a book on it. But don’t attempt it alone. You’re my precious granddaughter, and you’re a good kid.”

“Heh heh, okay then. What’s the name of this forbidden technique, by the way?”

“It’s called...” Ayaka’s grandmother blew a single strand of smoke from her mouth. “...*Kyokugen*.”

It didn’t matter to Ayaka if the technique was real or not. Not anymore.

If there’s even the slightest possibility—cling to it. Grasp at it.

Ayaka had spent hours reading the book, thinking about discussing its contents with her grandmother.

I know how to do this...

Visualize a thread.

Start at the bottom. Move up from the soles of my feet, through my knees, thighs, hips, stomach, chest. The thread weaving its way through my body.

Ayaka felt her whole body creak under the stress.

She pulled the thread taut.

The oni grinned down at Ayaka, who was much smaller than it was.

They must think I've given up.

"Heh heh heh—*Whoosh*—Ghh?"

The tip of Ayaka's spear pierced the oni's throat. It had no time to react.

"Baaahhhh!" The other oni roared in unison, trying to intimidate her as they readied their claws to strike.

She decapitated them one by one with her mana blade. The nearby oni started to rush her. Ayaka leapt toward the circle of heroes, getting behind the oni who was mocking and teasing her classmates. She sliced upward, splitting the creature in two.

But she wasn't done yet. In an instant, another oni's head was in the air as well. She used the butt of her spear to cave in another's face. Her strength, her speed—all of it had been amplified.

"The way she's moving... Ayaka-chan!"

"I-incredible!"

Her muscles were screaming in pain. But she knew she could do it. Her grandmother had warned her that a normal human could break under the pressure...

"But I can do this now."

I'm no normal human—now I'm a hero. I have my stat modifiers.

Even then, she felt her body crying out.

Who cares?

"Hyah!" She turned in an instant.

"Ghhe?!"

Ayaka leaped toward the two-horned oni that seemed to be the

leader of the group. She was so fast, it had no chance to even raise its arms to defend itself. She rapidly thrust her spear into its arm, and pulled it off balance, throwing it to the ground.

“Kisou style—Cross Drop.”

This time she used her own speed, not the momentum of her enemy.

Once, I hesitated. I let Kirihara Takuto take the killing blow. But I won't hesitate any more... Not for a single moment.

“Gyah?!”

With a single thrust, she pierced the oni's heart and used her Inner Bomb skill to blow it to pieces. The shockwaves from the explosion sent Ayaka's long black hair streaming out behind her, but she was completely unconcerned by it.

“I won't...”

Level up!

“...I won't let anyone else die. No one else.”

It doesn't matter if my body is ruined. So long as I can send everyone safely home to the old world.

Ayaka glared at the remaining oni after killing their leader in an instant, sharp waves of murderous intent emanating from her eyes. They took a step back. Her hair danced wildly in the wind which blew over the battlefield.

“If you're going to run, do it.” She flipped her spear with menace and began to walk toward them slowly. “I'm an oni now, too.”

Unique Skill Acquired—Silver World

Chapter 4: The Beginning of the End

THE ONI CHARGED after some hesitation, hoping to overwhelm her with numbers. But against Ayaka with her kyokugen technique, it was futile. She returned to protect the circle of heroes with a pile of corpses scattered behind her.

“Ayaka-chan. Thank goodness!” said Moe, still half-sobbing and wiping away her tears. Ayaka just smiled, and nodded in reply.

A unique skill, just when I’d given up hope... I never expected to learn mine at a time like this.

There would be time to ponder that later. The oni weren’t the only threat—there were now mid-sized and larger monsters closing in.

For now, I just have to kill. That’s all. Use everything at my disposal to protect my friends. You need to say the unique skill’s name out loud for it to activate, right?

She took a short breath, slowing her breathing.

“Silver World.”

As soon as she spoke the words, a sphere appeared in front of her. It looked like mercury, or a ball of molten lead just floating there, tiny ripples tracing quietly over its surface.

“What is this thing? What do I do?”

Ayaka quickly opened her skill window and looked at the details. Silver World was now there in her list right next to the others, and there was something written underneath.

Create

Create...? Create what? And how!?

The monsters were pushing in closer all the while.

Are we the only ones left alive out here?

It’s good that I have this skill now, but I’ve got no idea how to use it.

No time to sit around figuring it out either. I need to clear out the monsters around here and open up a path.

Ayaka shoved her spear deep into a large monster's temple, and used Inner Bomb to immediately detonate it, but only a fifth of the creature's face went missing.

It kept coming.

The difference in size between Ayaka and the monsters was becoming an issue. The oni had been only a little larger than human-sized so she had stood a chance, but even in her kyokugen form their power was nearly overwhelming.

I don't have the power to face up against these huge monsters! I injured its head, but it's still alive!

The great monster shook its head violently, and Ayaka was thrown to the ground. She landed, but immediately rolled into another attack, kicking off against the ground, leaping above the monster, and twisting her spear into the fracture she'd made with her first attack. In that instant, she looked out across the battlefield at the circle of heroes. One of the mid-sized monsters was causing them trouble and had drawn everyone's attention. They all looked stretched to breaking point, only capable of engaging the monsters that were directly in front of them.

Kayako was killing a nearby monster, but another lunged for her back. Ayaka was up in the air, unable to rush over to save her.

"No! Suou-san, behind you!" But it was no use, Ayaka's voice couldn't reach her.

She looked down at her hands.

I don't have any other choice.

She threw her spear, skewering the monster in the back of the head. Kayako finally noticed the creature behind her, looked up to see Ayaka, and realized what she'd done.

"Sogou-san!"

I still have that shortsword, but it's not much.

She reached for the weapon at her belt, and the huge monster below glared up at her, eyes bulging from its broken face. The creature's arms were reaching up to pluck her from the air. She didn't hesitate.

"Blade Set!" She plunged her shortsword, now reinforced with

mana, into the monster's eye.

It screamed, and its whole body convulsed violently, tossing Ayaka into the air and leaving her sword lodged in its eye. The monsters leaped to pursue her. Even in her kyokugen state, she was a sitting duck while she was empty-handed

"H-hey Nihei! The class rep's in trouble!"

"Half of our group! Can't half of us go and save her?!"

"We can't do it! We're barely holding on just defending over here!"

If only I had a weapon. Anything... It doesn't even have to be a spear. A sword—just so long as it's a weapon. If only there were a weapon in my hand.

The ball of liquid metal suddenly contracted, forming into the shape of a sword. In the next moment, the silver sword flew toward her at incredible speed.

With a miraculous grab, she reached out and caught it.

Without a second to process what had just happened, Ayaka swung. Her movements were flawless, cutting the monsters that leapt toward her into pieces. She landed neatly on the ground, the corpses splattered in heaps around her. She looked at the sword she was holding.

The grip fits perfectly in my hand!

She squeezed hard at the hilt.

Create. Does this mean my unique skill can create any weapon I need it to?

The huge monster which had just shaken her off was preparing to attack. Ayaka pulled hard at the kyokugen thread through her legs and dodged.

She glanced over at the circle.

Good, they're sticking together.

The monster pounded the earth with its fist, sending up a cloud of dust. Ayaka went for its legs.

If its head's too hard, If I can at least deal with its legs. I don't know if I can take it down with just one attack though. The strength and range of

Inner Bomb scale with the size of the weapon I use—it's not all that effective against larger monsters. There are other monsters here too. I can't spend too much time taking care of this one. That's why I went for the head at first... But right now that thing's guarding its head against attacks—that leaves its lower half wide open!

Racing through the clouds of dust, Ayaka closed in on the monster's ankle. She thrust her sword at it, screaming a battle cry as she attacked.

"Gyaaaauh!" The monster's scream echoed across the battlefield.

Stuck clean through its ankle was a huge blade...Ayaka's sword.

What?! My blade got bigger? But it doesn't feel any heavier than before!

It felt solid, and powerful in her hands...but incredibly light for its size. She pulled the sword out and tried swinging it across the creature.

A line traced diagonally across the monster's body, splitting perfectly in two. Blood burst from the seam. It was as if Ayaka's sword was the perfect length for butchering it. She swallowed and looked down at the sword again, unable to shake the feeling that none of it was real. It was back to normal size now.

Is that because I defeated the monster? So the blade matches the size of my enemy and it can change shape on its own? Not to mention, I didn't feel the weight of that thing at all.

Create. If this skill can make any weapon that the user wants it to, then...

I want another.

Ayaka began to run, whispering sharply under her breath, "Give me another weapon."

The sword in her right hand split in two, and she found another sword resting in her left. Ayaka arrived at the circle of heroes and began a one-sided massacre. She was lost in a whirlwind of monster screams. Her expression twisted in pain, but she kept her focus as she killed and killed and killed. The weapons in her hands continuously changed to suit the needs of the situation.

Sometimes she was holding a sword, at others a spear, an ax, a scythe... Sogou Ayaka used them all expertly.

Her Kisou style of martial arts was intended for practical use on the battlefield. It centered around the spear, but weapons dropped by enemies and allies were accounted for as well. It even had techniques for bamboo spears, sickles, and flails used by those who would chase down defeated samurai. It included ways to fight empty-handed and to change styles depending on battlefield conditions.

The ultimate goal was to be capable of using any weapon which came the user's way. Silver shapes floated in the air before Ayaka's eyes. The next weapon she planned to use was already created and ready. At times she threw them and they returned to her hand. But she didn't wait idly for their return, creating other weapons to cut down the monsters around her in the meantime. With the speed she gained from her kyokugen technique, none of them could keep up with her. She was lost in her ever-changing world of silver.

The S-class hero Sogou Ayaka had transformed into a kyokugen oni god of the battlefield, armored in silver light.

"Haah... Haah...!" How many of them have I killed now?

Ayaka had hunted down and killed all the monsters that stood in her way, and was on her way to the north gate.

Bane-san...

She looked back over her shoulder toward the south wall. Judging by the strange cries she could hear from afar, the area was still crawling with monsters.

This unique skill of mine is strong, but it has a weakness. I can't handle too many enemies at once.

Silver World's weapons would change size and shape to suit her target, but the giant sword would only be with her so long as she fought with similarly giant opponents. There were times when some of the smaller monsters would be caught up in the swings of her huge sword. Unfortunately, that seemed more a lucky bonus rather than the usual function. The second she turned her attention to a smaller foe, the weapon shrank in her hands to match.

It also seemed that the weapons she created became weaker the further away she threw them, getting much less powerful at long distances. When she created a spear and tried throwing it, she discovered that there was a maximum range to her skill's effect, and the spear she tossed returned to her after traveling a certain distance and

melded back into the mercury sphere.

On the other hand, they were deadly when Ayaka swung the weapons at close range. She'd found no monster that she couldn't defeat in a single blow with a close attack. There were none that she couldn't pierce or slash in half—the skill was perfectly adapted for close-combat.

Yet without the speed from her newly discovered kyokugen technique, she could hardly have managed to kill so many monsters. She could feel the stress it was causing on her body as it built up inside her.

If I run out of MP, I won't be able to use my unique skill any more. It consumes a lot when it's active.

Ayaka dispelled her unique skill.

In this situation, I can hardly go rushing off to the south wall anyway. My fighting style isn't suited to going up against large groups. I might be able to protect myself against a horde like that, but I don't know if I'd be able to protect everyone else. We should join up with the armies north of the citadel. With the strength of all our forces combined, we should have a chance.

Ayaka sprinted across the dirt, biting her lip.

Bane-san might already be— She frowned, banishing the thought. *No. Don't think like that. You can't think that now.*

"Isn't that...Guila-san?!" someone shouted.

The guardian of the citadel, Guila Heidt, came riding through the dust on his horse. Ayaka hadn't seen him since the confusion which came over the battlefield after the face of rage descended upon them. She couldn't see his vanguard anywhere, but he appeared to be alive.

He's of heroic blood, isn't he? He might not be all that put together emotionally, but he's a powerful warrior.

Ayaka rushed over to him.

"Guila-san, you're okay!"

She saw that he was clutching at his stomach.

"Ah, are you injured?"

His body began to sway in the saddle, then he fell to the ground with a groan. He lay on his side in the dirt with his intestines spilling out. Ayaka saw several sharp objects stuck into his back.

He was dead. Perhaps he had been for some time, even atop his horse.

“C-class rep...” Nihei looked at her—his face was pale.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

Is anyone still alive out there?

Ayaka and her group continued toward the north wall, killing monsters that jumped out from the shadows of buildings as they passed. Eventually, they drew closer and heard cries near the wall.

“They’re still fighting?”

It looked as if they were being pushed back, but the human side’s defenses were somehow still holding on.

“Everyone, reinforce their lines!”

Ayaka charged, and her group went with her, answering the call. They charged into the horde, catching some of the monsters in a pincer attack and coming out almost unscathed. They formed up with the defense forces.

“Class Rep?!”

“Murota-san! You’re okay!”

The remnants of Kirihara’s group were among the soldiers. Ayaka quickly gave orders for Kayako and the others to set up their defense.

“Suou-san, Nihei-kun cover this area! I’ll keep supporting you with the other soldiers!”

She activated Silver World and raced off to help those who were still fighting. The tide began to turn, and soon the monsters around the north wall were completely wiped out.

Ayaka walked back to Murota, turning her back to the stunned soldiers behind her. Murota Erii, third in command of Kirihara’s group after Oyamada, stared at her with her mouth open wide.

“You... You *are* the class rep, right?”

“Er? Y-yes.”

“Ah, figures. It’s just...you seemed like a whole different person there for a second is all.”

“I’m just glad everyone’s safe.” Ayaka breathed a sigh of relief, but Murota answered her with a pained expression and silence.

“Murota-san?”

“No...not everyone. Ikumi’s dead.”

“Kariya-san...?”

I don’t see her anywhere. She was a member of Kirihara’s group, right?

Murota hugged herself tight—her teeth started chattering. “Ikumi... When I was running, I saw...a monster eat part of her face. She was calling out for help, but I was so scared... I left her...I ran...”

“No...”

The fourth of our classmates to die.

“Ikumi, she... Half of her face was gone, but she... Her mouth was still moving—still calling for help. Heh heh... Like...was that even real?” Murota forced a thin smile on her lips, but her eyes were dark, hollow and cavernous.

Ayaka bit her lip so hard it almost drew blood. Then a heavy feeling of hopelessness overwhelmed her, and she grabbed Murota by the shoulders.

“Keep it together, Murota-san. We need the strength of all the B-class heroes in your group right now. Please help us.”

“Huh? Wait, but... Where’s Shougo? Huh? After that limb monster flew down, I thought... Didn’t I hear him screaming?”

“Oyamada-kun is...” With a bitter expression on her face, Ayaka quickly explained what had happened.

“Heh, Hah... Eh? What? So like, Shougo and Yasu are dead too? The Dragonslayer as well? All the Four Holy Elders? What the heck!? That’s hilarious,” Murota said without any trace of humor.

“Th-this doesn’t mean that either of them are dead! Bane-san and White-san I’m sure are still...*might* still be alive.”

I didn’t watch them die—I don’t know for sure.

“And you’re still here, aren’t you, Murota-san?”

“We only survived because of Agit-san.”

“Agit-san? Come to think of it, where did he...?”

Ayaka scanned the area but couldn’t find him.

“He took this big group of knights and led the limb monster away. I don’t know where he is now. Like...he was the one who protected us in the first place y’know? He brought us here.”

So the humanoid type that ate Abis-san... Agit drew it away from us with that long-range attack. Now he’s leading that face of rage away from the battle, using himself as a decoy.

“We don’t even know if Agit-san’s alive anymore. Like...we’re gonna die here, aren’t we, class rep? We’re totally done for, yeah?”

“Can you tell me why?” asked Ayaka. “Why haven’t you opened the gate? Why not go north?”

There should be whole armies out there—allies of ours to reinforce our ranks.

Murota just helplessly gestured to the gate in response. “... Monsters outside the gate.”

Thump!

The gate rocked on its hinges, letting out a creaking sound. Something was trying to get in. When Ayaka focused her hearing, she realized there were monsters crowding the gate on the other side.

“Eh? But the armies...”

“Dunno. Maybe they’re all dead too.”

No, that can’t be... They can’t be dead.

Listening closer, Ayaka now heard voices outside the walls.

They’re far from the gate, but there are people fighting out there. If we can wipe out the horde that’s trying to break in, we might be able to charge out and join up with them.

She clenched her fist tightly, her hands covered with sweat.

“Class rep,” Murota said feebly, “I think we’re screwed.” Her dead eyes were looking in the opposite direction to Ayaka’s—to the south.

“Ayaka-chan... The humanoid types are...” mumbled Moe.

She turned to see giant shadows looming over the battlefield, coming from the direction of the south wall.

“Bzzzt... Bzzzt...”

“Baaaiih!”

“Nyaai... Naaaiih!”

Three humanoid types stood before them.

The spherical monster made up of humanoid upper bodies had the Dragonslayer’s huge sword stuck into its side. The one that walked on four legs with the huge face had its head crushed. The last had lost its legs, but was still crawling toward them at terrifying speed with its two massive arms.

“Bane-san...”

All three bore the marks of the Dragonslayer—it was clear he had fought a desperate battle against all of them at once.

If they’re coming this way, that must mean...

The monster with the sword sticking out of it moved first—the humanoid torsos that crawled all over it threw some kind of projectiles at them and the air was filled with what looked like cannonballs. Those with shields held them above their heads to protect themselves, but when they landed the projectiles just bounced off their shields and rolled into the dirt.

One of the heroes beside Ayaka shrieked.

She looked down to see what it was the humanoid type had thrown at them.

They were human heads.

Ayaka’s face twisted with rage and she ground her teeth. “White-san...”

The head of the younger sister of the Four Holy Elders—White Angun lay at her feet. Her eyes were missing.

Ayaka took a short breath. “Murota-san.”

“Class rep?”

“If you’re going to give in...” Ayaka gripped her spear and began to walk toward the monsters. “...Save it for when I’m dead.”

“Sogou-san, don’t tell me you’re planning to—” said Kayako.

“Stay here, and hold the line. I’ll handle those three.” Ayaka shot a deadly look toward the south and a single tear traced its way down her cheek.

He’s the reason I was able to make it here.

He's the reason I could save all these people. They might be humanoid, but they're wounded now. I won't give up.

"This chance you've given me, Bane-san. I won't let it go to waste." She felt the threads pull tight through her muscles. "Silver World."

She gripped the sword her unique skill created for her with both hands.

Once all this is over, who cares if my body is broken. Right now I have to show them...

"There's still hope."

Sogou Ayaka leapt into battle, and screams echoed across the battlefield.

"This is the last of them."

Ayaka thrust her blade down into the monster's skull. Her voice was cold as ice, speaking her skill name as if passing a death sentence upon the creature which lay before her.

"Inner Bomb."



The humanoid type exploded from the inside, sending chunks of flesh flying in all directions. It slumped to the ground, blue blood gushed from what remained of the creature's mouth, its tongue lolling out. The other two defeated humanoid types were mere shapeless lumps of meat now.

"Three humanoid types...alone. That's impossible..." one of the soldiers whispered, his voice trembling.

"How is she so fast? And she can create weapons as she fights!"

"So that's what a hero from another world—an S-class hero—really is."

There was fear and awe in their voices too.

Ayaka stood panting in front of the fallen humanoid types.

Level Up!

She gripped her injured left arm.

Didn't get through without a scratch, but I'm lucky this is all they got me with. Fortunate that they were injured too—Banewolf already damaged them heavily. That's the only reason I was able to fight against the three of them at once.

Feelings of gratitude toward him flooded her chest for a moment, then she was filled with a sense of unease.

Ayaka slowly turned around.

A wave of monsters was swarming toward her.

They're finally here.

The whole mass of the horde that had broken through the southern wall was rushing toward them in one great fist.

Those three humanoid types were just the tip of the spear.

Another almighty crashing sound from a different direction entirely. Ayaka turned to look, sweat rolling down her cheeks and dripping from her jaw onto the ground below. Her breathing sounded so loud in her ears.

With the crash came an avalanche at the north gate—ogre soldiers

had broken through.

MIMORI TOUKA

WE PROCEEDED THROUGH the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, clearing out monsters as we went.

“That scream just now—”

It happened so suddenly. The earth shook, and the monsters were stampeding.

Seras looked over at me. “Sir Too-ka, was that...?”

I nodded, surveying the situation from atop our war chariot.

“Yeah.” It sounded similar to something we’d heard before. There was no time to hesitate. “Piggymaru.”

He stretched to link with me, and I sent feelers, thick as octopus tentacles, squirming up into the air.

The tentacles shot out from my back in a radial pattern. A terrifying number of monsters leaped out from the brush on all sides of our chariot.

There are so many of them. There’s a high chance some of these were drawn out of the underground ruins nearby.

“Attacking on sight, eh?” I sent the tentacles flying out in all directions. “Paralyze.”

The monsters that entered the range of my tentacles stopped cold and were left behind in our dust. Any that I could catch in time I also cast Berserk on, finishing them off with the usual combo.

Since we’re on the move it’s hard to catch all these things in range of my skills.

I watched the monsters burst into fountains of blood as they died, my hair ruffling in the wind.

“One of those mouth-lure monsters must’ve activated somewhere.”

From the sounds of it, pretty far away, though. But it definitely

sounded like that scream had when we stumbled across one. All these monsters seem to be heading in the same direction—north.

Eve cut down some smaller monsters with her sword, cursing our bad timing. “Why’d this have to happen now?”

Just then, a single white bird flew onto our chariot. Seras readied her bow to fire at it.

“Wait.” I stopped her. “Its eyes aren’t golden and I think I heard it...”

“I’ll be brief,” said the bird.

Seras and I exchanged looks.

“So it’s you, Erika.” *This bird must be a familiar of hers.*

It jumped up on my shoulder. The attacks of the monsters around us were somewhat slowed due to our counterattacks, but I could see hordes of them still moving around in the forest.

“Go on,” I said, never taking my eyes off the nearby monsters.

“You know the White Citadel of Protection is just north of here, don’t you?” She’d told us about the location before we left—a place to protect the nation of Magnar against the monster threat. “They’re being attacked by the Demon Empire’s armies *and* the monsters from the wilderness at present.”

“You think we should take a detour?”

“Just the opposite. I’ve seen the flags of the Kingdom of Alion, and the Bakoss Empire decorating the walls, but that wasn’t all...”

“The Holy Empire of Neah appears to be there too.” Erika’s familiar looked at Seras. “Their forces are likely led by Cattlea Straumss.”

The elf was visibly shaken by the news.

That princess, huh.

“Alionese forces are there too, right? What about Vicius?”

“From what my familiars have told me—Vicius and an S-class named Kirihara are absent. It seems they have ridden east.”

Never mind Kirihara, that foul Goddess is missing. Good news, then. I’ve got no way to deal with her yet.

“What about the others?”

“Sorry, but I wasn’t able to tell what kind of other heroes are present.”

“Okay. Not like we have a choice anyway. Right Seras?”

“No,” she replied, without hesitating. “We do not.”

“Be careful out there,” warned Erika. “From what I surveyed of the area before I came to find you, there are monsters in the Demon Empire’s forces from the Inner Circle out there on the battlefield. The human forces look to be penned into the citadel from the north and south. I imagine there are humanoid types within the walls by now.”

That mouth-lure might’ve been a Demon Empire trick. If our theory is right, the source of all evil can’t spawn humanoid types by itself. It’s possible they’re trying to use those powerful monsters to do their work for them.

“The humanoid types are bad enough, but the Inner Circle too...”

“Are they strong?” I asked.

“They’re the elites of the Demon Empire’s forces, second in strength only to the Demon King himself. From their troop movements, it’s as if they believe this one battle could win them the whole war.”

Without knowing how much strength the human side has inside that citadel, and how many heroes are left fighting, I can’t be too optimistic.

“Too-ka, use the weapons I gave you. Don’t hold back, okay?” Erika said through her familiar. “As I said, they were all experiments, one-time use items, not made to last. But I can guarantee you they’re strong. Don’t worry about what happens to the war chariot either. Just head north, as fast as you can.”

“Erika,” I said, stroking her familiar, “thanks for telling us all this.”

The bird nodded, hopped from my shoulder, and flew away.

Didn’t Erika say that speaking through her familiar tired her out? Like, enough to take her out of action for a whole day, maybe more?

“We can’t rely on getting more information from Erika’s familiars from here on out. We’ll have to gather it in real time.”

“If she hadn’t given us that report, then...” Seras trailed off with a look of gratitude on her face.

“Yeah, we might’ve taken a different route, away from the White Citadel of Protection. We really owe her one.”

They were both already back in the fight and I called out to the two of them, working in status effect skills as the monsters lunged for us.

“Seras. Eve.”

“Yes!”

“Hmph!”

“Worse comes to worst, I can always rush in to help the princess without you two.”

Eve grabbed one of the spears attached to the side of the war chariot, and jumped back up next to us. She handed the crystal-encrusted spear to me, and I poured my mana into it.

“If we fall behind,” she said, “I’ll send us back to the witch’s house—you don’t need to remind me of that.”

“I’m not letting you die, no matter what. If you sense your life is in danger in any way, send yourself back to Lis. Got that?”

Eve growled out a deep laugh.

“Understood,” she said, before launching the spear into the air.

When its glowing tip reached the pack of huge monsters following behind us, it detonated with a burst of pale fire. The monsters were consumed by flames. They screamed, appearing to try and beat the fires out. Before long they collapsed into burning heaps and we left them behind to smolder in the forest.

“Hmph. With the witch’s specially made weapons from this war chariot, even I can take down the huge monsters.”

“My status effect skills aren’t all-powerful—there’s a chance monsters can slip through the cracks. I’m counting on you to take them out.”

“Don’t worry.” Eve looked at me with her emerald green eyes and twitched her ears. “That’s why I have these eyes and ears of mine, to make sure none of them get through.”

I smiled, snorting at her comment, then moved over to the war chariot’s gun turret. I traversed the barrel, and poured mana into the crystal until the tip began to glow with pale blue light. A pale laser shot from the barrel, piercing a monster in the distance that was pursuing us through the forest. Blood spurted from the creature’s back, and it fell

sideways into the brush.

“We have to save enough of these things for when we arrive I guess, but right now just getting there is our top priority.”

We’re basically surrounded by a stampede on all sides. We have to get to the citadel as soon as possible, while fighting our way through this horde.

Seras changed into her spirit armor with a flash of light and leapt from the roof of the war chariot. She slashed a monster in two with her blade, a war cry on her lips.

I reached a tentacle out to catch her and pull her back in, placing her back on the chariot.

“S-sorry...” She regained her footing, but her expression was clouded and anxious.

“No worries. I understand how you feel, but don’t get impatient.”

Can hardly blame her for that. Cattlea’s life might be in danger at this very moment. It’s gotta be hard for her to keep her head straight. Not much I can do to put her mind at ease now, though. We can’t learn anything about what’s happening out there without the witch’s familiars.

I spread my tentacles once more, and fired another volley of status effect skills.

How long has it been? How many of these things have I killed?

Our war chariot raced through the forest, gaining speed.

I looked behind us to see the road of corpses we left behind, humanoid types lying there among them. The monsters pursued us endlessly, clambering over the bodies of their fallen comrades. We crushed any that made it too close.

But parts of the war chariot were broken now, and I could see Seras and Eve were clearly starting to tire. I had disconnected my link to Piggymaru some time ago.

Piggymaru’s going to get too tired before my MP runs out—that much can’t be helped.

Carving this road of slaughter through the northern reaches of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters was no easy task. At times I used my regular status effect skills, and other times used my Slow skill to make it through.

That’s the only reason we’ve made it so far without losing anyone.

“Sir Too-ka, are you okay?” Seras asked, out of breath. “Leave the monsters to us and take a break for at least a little while!”

Fighting like this, using up MP and pouring it into things has always been tiring. But it's getting worse. It's like my whole body's screaming at me to stop.

“This is nothing. I'm a leveled up hero with stat modifiers—I can take more than any average high elf or leopardman.”

In truth, keeping up a 360-degree fight with Piggymaru's tentacles was exhausting. But I was still more capable than she or Eve. I wasn't lying when I said this was nothing—not compared to the Ruins of Disposal, anyway.

It was easier to trick Seras by telling the truth.

“I hope we make it there in time,” I said.

A dark shadow fell over Seras' thin, white face, and she looked off to the north. Eve looked back the way we'd come—a bandage around her arm covering a light injury she'd sustained in the fighting.

“Looks like they've eased off for now,” she said.

I don't feel any more presences coming our way. Maybe it's because we've killed most of them, or...

“Maybe they've all arrived at the citadel already,” I wondered aloud. “We must be close.”

Still, there were so many of them, more than I imagined could possibly live here. There were likely a lot that lived deep in the underground ruins of this place. I wondered if they all made it up to the surface, or if yet more waited beneath.

I don't even want to imagine that's true.

I took out my Lord of the Flies mask. “Get ready to disguise yourselves. Eve, you should probably use that bracelet to turn yourself into your human form too.”

“Too-ka, mind if I ask something?”

“What's up?”

“The original plan was to find our way into the Magnari capital, and sneak onto the southern front as hired soldiers, right? But if we appear out of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters to join the fight—do you think anyone will believe we're just mercenaries? There's the

problem of Erika's magical items, too. And when you use your status effect skills isn't everyone going to realize you're a hero from another world? I thought you wanted to hide your identity."

"...You're smart where it counts, Eve."

The plan of sneaking in as mercenaries is basically off the table now. Even with the Goddess gone, killing monsters with this mysterious power of mine is going to stand out no matter what. If rumors reach the Goddess, she might realize that I'm still alive. I can hide my appearance all I want, but I'm revealing my identity just by using my skills in combat...and these aren't enemies I can face without them.

I need a cloak of invisibility. Something to hide myself completely.

"We just need to trick them all. I can't deny it's a makeshift plan, but I think..." I looked down at the fly mask in my hands. "I'm going to resurrect some ghosts."

"Ghosts?"

"Yeah. Anyway, we've gotta hope the Princess of Neah stays safe until we arrive." I put on the mask, and looked north. "If she's gone, there's no point in any of this. I know it's tough, but just a little further, Sleii. We're almost there."

Sleii neighed in reply, drenched in sweat, and galloped even faster.

If all the enemies are already taken care of by the time we arrive, that would be fine too. But right now we need to hurry, and plan for the worst-case scenario.

"We have to gamble that whoever's still out there fighting can hold on."

SOGOU AYAKA

OGRE SOLDIERS FLOWED in through the north gate, trapping the heroes in a pincer movement. Ayaka was preparing to make a snap decision about what to do, when...

"These ogre soldiers are no match for the might of Neah! Slay them!"

A clear voice rang out, high over the racket, and a band of knights clad in white armor came riding in through the ogre soldiers from the rear like an avalanche. The ogre soldiers, caught from behind, were cut to pieces by the charge. A woman rode at the head of the band of knights, her armor more extravagant than the others—it was Cattlea Straumss.

“I-it’s the Princess of Neah!” cried one of the surviving soldiers, pointing to her in amazement.

“So here you are, heroes from another world!” shouted Cattlea, pointing her sword at Ayaka. “Leave the southern horde to us for now—you take on these ogre soldiers!”

That’s right.

The ogre soldiers are a part of the Demon Empire’s army. They have the mysterious power of that essence that weakens the people of this world. The only ones the essence don’t affect are us.

The white knights rode past them and engaged the monsters that still poured in through the southern wall.

The monsters from previous generations, coming from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, don’t have any essence. Those knights can fight them at their full strength.

Ayaka watched the knights pass, then ran for the north gate, tossing her spear at the ogre soldiers sprinting toward her.

“2-C heroes, with me! We aren’t affected by the essence they give off! We can beat them!”

Nihei gave himself a pep talk, then followed. Kayako came after, giving orders to the others from behind. Suddenly cries pierced the air, and black dragons flew in over the north gate, roaring as they came.

“The Black Dragon Knights!”

Gus, a young knight of the Elite Three, was leading them.

“All of you! Support the heroes! Form up!” he cried, a magical device in his hands. He fired, sending a fireball to burn through the horde, which was advancing on the Knights of Neah.

“Reinforcements! We...w-we’re coming too!” Nihei and the rest of Ayaka’s group were inspired.

“What’s with those guys?” muttered Murota, who was blankly

watching the scene unfold, “Low-ranks getting all jumped up. Even Ayaka’s startin’ to look like a hero.”

“Murota-san!” Ayaka shouted to her. “You have to fight to survive! We need your strength in this battle too! Who cares about the past now?” She swept away a group of ogre soldiers with her magical blade. “Fight! You have to fight for the present!”

“...Jeez. Even in this other world you’re actin’ like the class rep? Fine. I’ll do it, I’ll do it! I’m not gonna die...n-not like I-Ikumi did. I’m not gonna let them get me!”

Even if it was mostly by desperation, Murota was motivated as well. Seeing her reaction, the others in Kirihara’s group followed Ayaka’s group into battle.

“Those lowbies are fighting better than we are! We’re the elite group of heroes, aren’t we?! Get ready, we’ve gotta do this!”

“A-and we’ve got the humanoid type killer class rep on our side if this all goes badly too!”

“Let’s go!”

Ayaka watched as they all ran into battle.

The way I fought against those humanoid types—it gave them hope. Or so I’d like to think.

The heroes put up a surprisingly good fight, perhaps because they had leveled up during the battle. The number of ogre soldiers streaming through the gate began to visibly thin. They were especially helpless before Ayaka’s fierce attacks upon them. Once it was clear the tide of the battle had turned, Cattlea and a portion of her holy knights came riding back north.

There were still monsters in the south, but the horde was controlled for the time being.

The forces of Neah and Bakoss clearly aren’t coordinating together though. Their countries really don’t have good relations with each other, do they?

Even so, their movements as military units were far more disciplined than those of the heroes. They cleanly handled all of the mid and larger sized monsters that came their way.

“Ayaka Sogou,” Cattlea addressed her, looking down from atop

her horse.

“Y-yes?”

The princess surveyed the miserable scene within the citadel for the first time since entering.

“I had no notion that it was this bad within the walls.”

Ayaka gave her a brief explanation of what had happened. Cattlea listened intently with a serious look in her eyes, her pure white hand resting on her well-proportioned jaw.

“All but the eldest son of the Four Holy Elders have perished. Bach-dono of the Elite Three and Commandant Guila killed in battle too. Abis Angun is lost to us as well. And we cannot be sure that Agit or the Dragonslayer are still alive,” said Cattlea sullenly.

“Did something happen outside the walls?”

“We were ambushed by the Demon Empire. We had the overwhelming advantage in numbers, but there was a strong Inner Circle foe among them. We still have no way of handling it.”

“The Inner Circle...” Ayaka muttered. The name given to the most powerful of the Demon King’s underlings.

“The enemy’s southern advance had been so low, we believed that even after arriving at our final destination, the Magnari capital, we would have more than enough time to prepare. But it appears the slower moving force was merely a decoy. Their aim may have been to stop us here all along.”

We intended to mass our forces, but the enemy must have planned to reduce our number before that happened. They might even have intended to kill the Goddess here—if she were here, that is.

“We fell for it, through and through,” said the Princess.

“So right now, what’s going on outside the walls?” Ayaka asked.

“Baron Pollary and Sir Walter have the command, and our soldiers are doing their utmost to push the enemy back. But that Inner Circle monster...we can do nothing to confront it. It cannot be overwhelmed by mere numbers. You understand now why I’m here, I take it?”

“We heroes are the only ones who can face them.”

“Precisely. I’m counting on you, Ayaka, hero from another world.”

As they were speaking, Cattlea's eyes never strayed from the corpses of the humanoid types that Ayaka had slain. There was hope in her eyes, and pure amazement.

"We can overwhelm the monsters in the south with numbers, but you heroes are the only ones who can stop the Inner Circle."

With my unique skill, and the kyokugen technique, I might be able to defeat them. We have to prevent losses outside the walls for the battles still to come. I've no choice but to confront the Inner Circle.

Ayaka controlled her breathing, then took one more deep breath.

"Let's go." She stared resolutely at the north gate. "We must clear a path."

Passing through the gate, they began slaughtering ogre soldiers immediately. Ayaka went first, riding on horseback and piercing them with her spear from above. When they came out on the other side, the scene which confronted them was chaotic. There was no line or discipline to the battle, just a dozen or more scattered skirmishes.

"What is this...?" asked Ayaka.

An ogre soldier leaped at her from the side, brandishing its sword and screaming a battle cry.

"This is no time to stop and stare! Everyone, form up!"

A chorus of voices shouted back, still in high spirits. Ayaka and her group were swallowed once more by the muddy waters of combat. The heroes dashed forward, unsure of who was friend or foe. But they were transformed—as if they had grown and matured from their time on a real battlefield.

"Kill! Kill! *Kill!* Murder all the freakin' Demon Empire soldiers!"

"Don't forget our strength is in numbers! Take down the strong ones by working together!"

"You at the back, support Kiri-hara's group with your abilities!"

Ayaka's group were well-practiced in working together—a style that worked well to support Sogou Ayaka's exceptional strength. Now they were using those same techniques to support the B-class heroes from Kiri-hara's group. Yasu's group was the same. They learned to support Yasu from the sidelines with support skills in the same way

Ayaka's group had—from Banewolf.

“Let's go!” Nihei shouted. “There are things we low-rankers can do to help in our own way!”

The B-class heroes attacked the savage ogres, supported by the lower ranked heroes at their backs.

“You think you can kill me? Come on and try, you monsters! Grraaaah!”

“I'm going home, no matter what! I'm going back to the old world!”

“Erii, Nihei's lot are getting pushed back! Go round and support them!” Kayako raised her voice. “If there are soldiers in danger, save them if you can! They can help us in our fight against the monsters from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters later!”

Kirihara's group called back to her, without turning their heads away from the battle. Murota was firing off skills too, and seemed to be regaining some of her fighting spirit, little by little.

“What the heck? Now even that stone-faced Suou's fired up?! That's freakin' hilarious! Hey, Minamino, look out behind you!”

Ayaka closed her fists tightly, feeling a faint wave of happiness wash over her.

Maybe it's just temporary, because of the situation we've been forced into...but right now, we're working as one. As classmates.

A rush of power flowed through Ayaka's whole body.

Eventually—though it took a long time—they managed to clear the monsters from their immediate area. The heroes weren't the only ones facing down the ogre soldiers out there. The Holy Knights of Neah, led by Princess Cattlea herself, were a strong presence on the battlefield too. Their attacks from horseback were especially strong, despite the effect that the Demon King Essence was having on them.

“Silver World.”

But Sogou Ayaka's power on the battlefield was on a different level. She killed monsters that were too much for the others with a single thrust of her spear, leaving behind a trail of monster corpses in her wake. The group surrounding Ayaka were practically unopposed wherever they went.

There are so many of them... More than I ever imagined possible!

She felt the doubt rising in her chest. Cattlea cut down another ogre and brought her horse level with Ayaka's.

"This number of ogre soldiers moving through Magnari territory... They should have been discovered earlier, but we received no reports. Something isn't right." Cattlea scrunched up her eyebrows. "It's gradual, but I feel that their numbers are still increasing."

"There are more of them?"

Suddenly, screams were heard in the distance, and bodies could be seen being flung about like toys.

A monster that looked like a goat-headed demon with four horns—seven meters tall and the center of a storm of violence. A Black Dragon Knight flying near the goat-headed giant was in complete panic and appeared to have lost control of his mount.

"Likely, the Demon King Essence is so strong, not even the dragon's master can control it now," said Cattlea, looking intently over at Ayaka. Her eyes told Ayaka everything she needed to know.

That's the Inner Circle monster she told me about.

Nerves flooded Ayaka's chest, and she tightened her grip on the spear in her hand before locking her gaze squarely on the goat-headed devil. In the next moment, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

It was looking toward her as well.

"It's you," the goat-headed demon spoke to Sogou Ayaka. His heavy, twisted voice pierced the air of the battlefield, thundering into her ears.

Her heart leaped in her chest and she felt a sudden pressure pushing down on her, like she was face to face with some terrifying, swirling vortex. It was as if the monster had her heart clutched in its talons.

"You're the one interfering with our *harvest*. A hero from another world, aren't you?" The demon roared as he came for her, sweeping away whole lines of powerless Alionese soldiers. "I am Zweigseed, Second of the Sworn, and I shall remove you—the greatest obstacle to our fine harvest!"

To her horror, the beast ripped open his own chest with its huge claws. Blood burst from the wound, creating a thick red mist around it. In the next moment, the blood changed shape, forming and hardening into a huge curved blade. Zweigseed grasped the blood sword and charged straight for Ayaka, footsteps shaking the ground as he came.

Ayaka dismounted from her horse, her breathing shallow, and activated her kyokugen technique. She then raised her right hand into the air.

“Silver World.”

The silver sphere appeared beside her just as voices rose up from behind.

“They’re here! Golden-eyes from the forest are pouring out of the castle!”

The monsters inside the castle had finally made it out of the north gate.

“This is where we make our stand! We can do this, everyone!” Nihei wiped the blood from his forehead, where he’d sustained a light injury, and called out to the others in encouragement.

I’ll leave it to them!

Zweigseed showed no sign of slowing down, swinging the blood sword before him as he came. He towered over Ayaka and the battlefield, an intimidating sight.

I can’t dodge it.

She created two swords, gripping them in either hand and waiting for him to strike.

Ayaka swung upward to meet Zweigseed’s strike with her own. Her blades morphed as she struck, expanding to match the size of her opponent’s, and the crashing sound of their swords rang out. The monster’s weapon was knocked back.

Zweigseed took a short step back, letting out a harsh growl. She could feel his surprise at how swiftly and powerfully her blades had answered his. She was almost blown away by the strength of his attack, but somehow held on.

She tried to counter, shouting as she swung up at the monster with incredible speed. Their blades collided once more, and Ayaka’s

body was again thrown back by the impact.

How are his attacks so heavy?! This creature's so huge, but still so fast!

A terrible trembling ran through her spine and she felt numb. Zweigseed narrowed his golden eyes at her.

“The strength to trade blows with one such as myself—you are the *hope*, aren't you?”

Ayaka didn't respond, and moved in to attack again.

Their third blow shook the very air around them. Again and again, their swords rang out, but neither could gain the upper hand. For a split second, Ayaka looked out over the battlefield. Perhaps because she was holding Zweigseed at bay, all her allies appeared to be moving more freely now.

They must be out of range of the essence he's giving off. And maybe the ogre soldiers don't have that much essence to begin with? If I can keep this Inner Circle monster busy, Cattlea-san and the others can whittle down the enemy's strength!

The other heroes made no attempt to interfere in the duel between Ayaka and Zweigseed. Perhaps they were afraid of dying or perhaps they just didn't feel there was any space for them to break in. Either way, Ayaka was glad they didn't try to help.

Everyone's doing what they should be. Doing whatever they can.

In the midst of the blood and ringing silver, Zweigseed narrowed his eyes at her.

“Such battle prowess! You have the potential to someday threaten the King. Before that flower even begins to bloom...” The pressure Zweigseed gave off grew more intense still. “...I will nip it in the bud!”

Perhaps because of how long the Goddess had been looking down on her, Ayaka was a little taken aback by his high praise. She shook those feelings away, and gripped her swords. She swung with everything she had, but Zweigseed blocked, deflecting the blows with his sword of blood.

The blades scraping against each other sent sparks into the air.

He isn't just raw strength. There's a solid technique to his movements.

They continued their attacks, neither letting the other rest for a

moment. The kyokugen technique was taking a toll on her body, but Ayaka knew she couldn't fight this monster without it.

I'm at more of a disadvantage the longer we fight. I have to finish this quickly!

In the rage of their intense fighting, Zweigseed suddenly pulled his blood sword away and transformed it into a scythe. The sharp, curved blade of his new weapon made it look like Ayaka was facing the grim reaper himself.

"Ayaka-chan!" Moe screamed at her.

His scythe loomed, and Ayaka had no way to deflect it with her sword. It came for her mercilessly, the thick blade threatening to reap her head off her shoulders. Then Zweigseed's golden eyes opened wider, glaring at Ayaka with a monstrous look.

She had blocked his scythe's attack *with a scythe of her own*.

"You're not the only one that can change the shape of your weapons!" she shouted.

Zweigseed laughed. "Interesting."

Their blades scraped against each other, trembling with the pressure as Ayaka pushed toward the monster.

"You said you would nip me in the bud? No." She let out her inner oni, pulling her body back and turning her scythe into a spear. "I'm the one who will harvest you."

"Now you understand, hero from another world!" Zweigseed slashed his claws across his chest, sending a fresh mist of blood up into the air. "A sublime, raw will lives in each human. That is all that makes you worth harvesting. The stronger your hope, the sweeter the fruits of your despair. Struggle against your fate to the very end, human!"

Ayaka felt a chill of terror run down her spine.

He was complimenting my abilities to give us hope because the loss of hope would deepen our despair. There's no negotiating with this opponent—nothing more to be said. I have to destroy him.

Zweigseed held a huge blood sword in each hand as he spoke, while Ayaka had transformed her spear into a trident.

"I welcome your presence, hero of hope!" His blades whirled and slashed in front of him like spirits of the air, drawing lines of death

wherever they went. “Unless you kill me here, all hope will be lost—that much is certain! All those here will perish!”

“Yes. That’s exactly why...” There was a flash of silver, as Ayaka struck out with all her might, grazing the monster’s cheek. Blood flowed out in strands to join the bloody mist which clouded around him. “I’m going to kill you. No matter what!”

“That’s it! Yes! That is the will of yours! Exactly what makes you so worthy of harvest! But I wonder how long you will last?!”

Zweigseed switched into a defensive stance as Ayaka advanced on him. Her attacks beat against his dancing blood swords, but she was pushed back each time she made progress.

He knows. He knows I’m at a disadvantage when it comes to a long, drawn-out fight!

They were evenly matched, but Ayaka couldn’t find a way to break his defenses. Zweigseed on the other hand, had given up on attacking entirely. He stretched out the fight and waited for Ayaka to tire.

At this rate, I’m in trouble. If I can’t disengage, then our remaining forces will have to win this battle on their own.

She looked out over the ogre soldiers, and the monsters streaming in from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. The Sacred Alliance was caught between them. They were holding out, but only barely.

Cattlea’s forces were putting up an especially good fight. She was now also leading the soldiers of the white citadel itself, who had lost their leader. The Knights of Neah were keeping the monsters at bay. The Alionese forces were fighting fiercely, gaining ground and retreating when necessary. Baron Pollary was keeping the soldiers’ morale high. Ayaka saw now why he was so trusted with command, even by the Goddess herself. The Bakossi army fought as hard as the others. The Black Dragon Knights swooped down from above upon their enemies, clearly making gains but always wary of the counterfire from below that prevented them from freely maneuvering.

Finally, there were the heroes...fighting against the ogres on the frontlines, unaffected by the essence they produced. They fought well, staying together and advancing on the enemy. But Ayaka could sense they were hanging on by a thread. Once one of the pieces fell, she knew they would all come crashing down.

Everyone, you can do this! At least I can try, too!

She sliced out with her sword at incredible speed, creating a gust of air as she went, but the thick blades of the enemy threw her back.

It's no use! If all he does is defend, I can't find an opening! I just have to hope the others can push back the enemy on their own.

Before long, it appeared that Ayaka's prayers were coming true. Her allies began to push back the Demon Empire's forces. The heroes in particular were defeating more ogre soldiers than they ever had been before.

Ayaka knew the reason why.

They're leveling up! Getting stronger the more they fight. I'm at a disadvantage because of the stress the kyokugen technique places on my body, but usually we heroes have the advantage in longer battles. We grow as we fight—get stronger, and restore our lost MP. That's exactly why heroes from another world are considered saviors in the first place.

Newly inspired, Ayaka's next attack knocked Zweigseed back a short distance.

“What?!”

That was her opening, and she refused to let it slip away. She instantly prepared to leap at her foe.

“My name is Einglanz. I am First of the Sworn.” A heavy, low, and gravelly voice rumbled out over the battlefield.

Ayaka felt it in her gut. It was so loud, at first she thought someone was using a megaphone. She couldn't help but be absorbed by the extraordinary presence she now felt. The heroes stopped fighting and looked out over the field toward the source of the voice. And one by one, their faces fell to despair.

“N-no...”

“There are too many of them!”

Lines and lines of ogre soldiers stretched out from east to west, as if forming some great net in which to catch their prey. In the center of their lines was a throne which looked almost too big to be real. It took several huge monsters to support it from beneath, like a palanquin upon their shoulders. A purple shadow sat atop it, sweeping its oppressive gaze across the battlefield.

The newly appeared enemy forces advanced slowly but surely toward them.

“How are there so many of them?” asked Cattlea in astonishment.

Baron Pollary stopped fighting to look as well. “How did they march so many all the way down here?! We received no reports! How could the Sacred Alliance fail to notice such an army?!”

“You must be confused, humans,” bellowed Einglanz. “Wondering how we brought so many ogre soldiers this far south, no? But they did not *travel* to this place at all.

“I birthed them.”

“They were born...down here?!” Baron Pollary exclaimed frantically. “I-impossible! Only the source of all evil is capable of birthing golden-eyed monsters! D-does that mean that this is...”

“No.” Einglanz rejected Baron Pollary’s suggestion before it even left his mouth. “I am not the Demon King. I am a being that he has chosen to share his power with. I’m capable of creating troops wherever I like. To you, I expect this seems impossible—unfair, even.”

Cattlea said she felt as if the number of ogres was increasing. She was right. Newly-birthed ogre soldiers have been slowly being added to the frontlines this whole time. They must have been birthed in the nearby mountains and forests, hidden there for days. But why wouldn’t they use this force right from the start?

On second thought, Ayaka knew exactly why. She glared at Zweigseed as they crossed swords yet again.

This is the timing they wanted. To crush our hope. To send us into an even deeper despair. The worst timing possible for us is the most effective for them. That’s why they chose to reveal their army now.

“Lord Einglanz is special, even among my elite order of the Sworn! He has the trust of the Demon king himself! Even I have to admit some envy for his incredible strength,” howled Zweigseed, swinging his blood swords.

This Einglanz is someone even the Second of the Sworn can be envious of... This is bad. That monster must have more Demon King Essence than Zweigseed, too. If an enemy like that makes it to the battlefield, we won’t stand a cha—

“Waaaaaah?!”

A rain of spears was falling from the sky, arching toward them from the direction of the group of ogre soldier reinforcements. The long spears were thrown high up in the air—unable to reach Ayaka and her allies at such a distance, but...

“S-Sir W-Walter?” Gus of the Black Dragon Knights’ Elite Three called out in astonishment as Walter fell from the sky, pierced by one of the flying spears. The corpses of the other Black Dragon Knights dropped with him.

They had been completely dismembered by the barrage. There was no way to tell human flesh from dragon flesh as their remains dropped to the ground.

“Sir Walter!” screamed Gus, his face twisted in agony.

They’re just trying to make us scared, that’s all.

The enemy’s attack was working exactly as planned. The soldiers around Ayaka were clearly beginning to creep backward in retreat.

“Now comes the despair.” Einglanz raised a huge cup in his hands, as if toasting his success. “This despair is pure art! An offering to my king. Now! ...Show us all how you struggle to the very end. You lovely, foolish little enemies of mine.”

The ogre soldiers around him were inspired by the speech. They roared, and began to push ever harder on the frontlines. Even so, the Sacred Alliance still currently had the advantage in numbers.

If we can just keep our morale high, then we can make it through. If I can defeat Zweigseed and move right on to that other Inner Circle demon, we might still win this! I just need to...

What’s that noise?

The army of enemy reinforcements split down the middle, their armor rattling as they brought forth a huge pot from within their ranks. A thick stem rose from its center, and some strange plant shaped like a pair of unsettling human lips was wobbling around atop it. Ayaka glanced over as she traded blows with Zweigseed.

What is that thing?

Zweigseed’s golden eyes met hers as they clashed again.

“The ogre sappers placed a demonic device in your castle this morning. Don’t you remember?”

That noise we heard...like a scream. That was what drew the monsters from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, almost like it was a signal to them.

“Not even our king can create humanoid types. But a device to lure them out? Yes!”

So that device is the thing that brought all the monsters here!

“That demonic device out there is several times more powerful than the one we used inside your citadel! You understand what that means, don’t you, hero of hope?!”

Ayaka’s hair stood on end, goosebumps running up and down her arms.

No! Anything but that!

There were ogre soldier reinforcements on the battlefield, and another of the Inner Circle had appeared. But on top of all that, there would soon be more reinforcements from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters.

Ayaka screamed with all her strength, still crossing swords with Zweigseed, “Someone! Anyone! Destroy that thing!”

Then the plant rising from the pot began to count down—it was a woman’s voice, and inhumanly loud. As if taking attendance at some morning assembly, its voice washed out in waves over the battlefield. It wasn’t long before every commander of every army out there had heard the message. The ogre soldiers formed up around the demonic device to defend it. Einglanz stood from his throne and spread his arms wide.

“Ten minutes, by your reckoning, until this device activates. Now try to stop it, humans!”

“Daughters of Neah!” Suddenly, Cattlea’s voice rang out, and she raised her sword high in the air from the saddle in which she sat. “We are done defending! Now is the time to attack! Go forward, and never look back! Put your lives on the line with me, my knights!”

She held her sword aloft and swung down hard—the tip pointed directly at the demonic device.

“Charge!”

Cattlea went first, the other knights following in a torrent behind her. Their charge toward the device was reckless, almost suicidal. The

ogre soldiers formed up to meet them, crouching down low with long spears in their hands.

“No, the first wave of knights will be...!” Gus, who was flying overhead, was the first to comprehend the situation.

“Listen now! Soldiers of Bakossi!” He screamed over the great beats of his black dragon mount’s wings. “I’m going to support Cattlea Straumss and the other Neahan soldiers in their charge! If you have truly sworn to protect this world, even if it should cost you your lives, then charge! Charge with me!” He turned and dove down to follow Cattlea as she rode into battle.

It only took a moment for the Bakossi soldiers to respond and a wave of airborne knights went with him. This was no time to squabble about the relations between their countries. Gus’s dragon shot forth like a black bullet as he daringly slammed his mount into the line of ogre spears, demolishing the formation that had been ready to skewer Cattlea’s advance. The black dragons let out piercing roars, intimidating the ogres. The rest of the Black Dragon Knights followed into the breach, crashing behind Gus like an avalanche. Cattlea’s knights surged through the opening they created, breaking the ogre ranks further.

A black dragon bit down on an ogre’s head and ripped it straight from its shoulders as other Bakossi soldiers cut down ogres all around it.

Giving up the defense also meant much higher casualties on the human side. The ogres were fighting with an almost reckless abandon. One of the black dragons was surrounded and mercilessly stabbed to death as it desperately swung its tail at the enemy. A knight was thrown from her horse, and brutally killed by another swarm of monsters.

But there was no hesitation. Everyone put their lives at risk to destroy the demonic device that would determine the course of the battle to come.

Flooding in after the Bakossi and Neahan forces came the Alionese army. Baron Pollary led the charge, holding their standard in one hand and raising his voice high.

“Follow me, soldiers of Alion! The great strength of Alion has vanquished that source of all evil before! Let’s show these filthy ogres what we’re made of! Charge!”

The rising torrent of people rushing toward the demonic device became a wave.

“We’re going too,” said Kayako.

Nihei raised his sword, and called out to the others. “The class rep’s going to defeat that Inner Circle monster! Then that other one too! W-we have to buy time until she can defeat them for us! Let’s go!”

The heroes finally formed themselves up, and joined the fight too.

Everyone!

Ayaka found new determination—and completely abandoned her own defense. She summoned all the strength she had left, refining the power and technique of her attacks to their very limit. Cursing her creaking bones, she swung up at the monster.

“Ugh?!”

Her blade sliced across Zweigseed’s torso and opened a hole in his shoulder. Vivid red blood came spurting out.

“You’ve given up, haven’t you?” the monster said, narrowing his golden eyes at her. “You aren’t defending any more.”

He wasn’t looking at Ayaka, though—he was staring out at Cattlea and the others as they made their charge.

It can’t be... Ayaka felt her heart turning cold.

“That demonic device... It doesn’t take ten minutes to activate. We could use it right now if we wanted to. This was just a ploy to break those meddlesome lines of yours. And how you fell for it!”

They tricked us. We were all focused on that one goal...a single ray of hope. But the enemy had us in the palm of their hand. They wanted us to break our line formations, but it’s more than that. They wanted us to believe there was hope, for just those few minutes.

Tears welled up in Ayaka’s eyes.

It’s too evil... It’s all just too evil!

The monsters did everything they could to crush their minds, then annihilate them completely.

And yet I believed everything the enemy told me, just like that. I’m the one that caused all of this!

The ogre soldiers’ lines spread and they began to surround the attackers. The golden-eyed monsters which had rushed in from the south were closing in behind the Sacred Alliance armies, too. Suddenly

the demonic device began to shine, sending out several rays of purple light like some kind of prism. Zweigseed turned his two blood swords back into a single great scythe in preparation for the harvest.

“It’s too late for you! All of it, too late! Nothing left!” For a second, it was as if the whole world stopped. Everything was silent. “All that remains is the festival of blood!”

A howling cheer went up from the amassed army of evil and a veil of despair descended everything.

Many of Ayaka’s allies hadn’t caught up to what was happening yet. The commanders, on the other hand, were gradually starting to realize they’d been deceived.

“I-impossible! There should still be time!”

One of the soldiers stopped running, and dropped to his knees in despair. Ayaka unconsciously reached out a hand to her friends, who were staring dumbfounded at the activated device.

“Everyone—”

“To think you’d allow me such an opportunity in a one-on-one battle...!” cried Zweigseed.

No!

“Careless,” the demon intoned as the great blood scythe tore into Ayaka’s flesh. “The fall from hope to despair... This is the harvest we desire.”

From the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, came yet another horde.

Their ears still heard the heavy footsteps of the monsters as they came.

The cries and shrieks from far south of the wall.

Before long, those cries brought them into the world of nightmares, the ultimate manifestation of their misery.

It was the beginning of the end.

Something was wrong.

Nobody knew who noticed it first. The great cacophony of sounds and rumbling from the south spoke of a horde on the move, and yet...

It's almost as if...

“Are they...screaming?”

The panicked screams of monsters filled their ears. At the very least, they were not the cries of gleeful creatures anticipating a hunt.

The sun hung in the sky above them and an explosion rang out, so loud it sounded as if it could destroy everything. There was a great light from the other side of the south wall.

What's happening?

Even the Demon Empire's forces paused in their fighting—Zweigseed and Einglanz too—as if they had no clue as to what would happen next.

“What is...?” asked Zweigseed.

The face of rage appeared from a corner of the wall—the humanoid type that had caused so much death in the citadel.

It stopped suddenly.

“Eh?”

What happened next was inconceivable to all who witnessed it. Blood began to spurt from the creature's body, and it collapsed on the spot. A blue rain fell on the whole area around the monster's corpse.

From behind it appeared a horde of human-shaped stone statues. They silently ran down the fleeing monsters, chasing them across the battlefield. There were so many of them—running from monster to monster, from ogre to ogre—catching them and beating them to death.

Just then, a horse-drawn chariot came riding out of the dust cloud the statues had thrown up. It looked beaten and battered, as if it had just raced through another terrifying battlefield. A huge eight-legged horse with blood-red eyes pulled it, a terrifying black shadow looming over everything around it. Another black shape knelt on the chariot's roof, a black cloak fluttering in the wind. It wore a fly mask, and there

were two others with similar masks and cloaks by its side—all three were armed.

The black figure's twisted voice boomed loud over the silent battlefield. "I hereby declare that we, the Lord of the Flies Brigade and successors of Ashint, oppose the Demon Empire's forces and the golden-eyed monsters it has brought here."

The voice was dark and absolute, as if it were the Demon King himself behind that mask.

"We are here to annihilate you."



Chapter 5: The One Who Transcends the Limits

CLICK.

I took the voice amplifying crystal out of my mask and closed it in a sealed container I'd made from some food packaging my leather pouch had sent me. Then I put it back in my bag.

This way it won't amplify my voice if I don't want it to, even if there is a bit of mana left.

"I hope we made it in time." I surveyed the swirling battlefield. "Looks like the standard of Neah hasn't fallen yet."

We had been riding furiously through the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters when we heard it—a scream that sounded almost like another mouth-lure. It shook the whole forest, pulling a new tidal wave of golden-eyed monsters toward the citadel.

It was a stampede as huge as the one we faced outside the witch's house. Almost as if that sound brought every last monster from the deep abysses of the underground ruins crawling out into the sunlight. Once that happened, we had to get to the citadel as fast as we could.

I looked back at the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters we'd just escaped, listening to the four wheels of our war chariot crunch as they rolled us forward. Sleis's hooves still rhythmically pounded the earth below.

"Ended up using pretty much all the weapons Erika gave us, huh," I said.

But we had no choice and no time to hesitate. The monsters were all rushing in the same direction—the White Citadel of Protection. The more we killed on the way, the less threat they would pose to the Princess of Neah. If we were going to kill them eventually, who cared about the timing?

But now here's our final trump card, Erika's "last army."

They were in a pouch filled to the brim with little carved crystals.

"Pour enough mana into them, and they'll return to their golem form,"

Erika had explained. *“This is my secret weapon against those golden-eyed monsters out there. They took a long time to make, you know. There are combat golems sleeping in those crystals there—shrunk down. I forget how many are in there now... They only attack golden-eyed monsters, so don’t worry about them going after anything else.”*

“I can’t have anyone underestimating the great Erika Anaorbael, now, can I? I imagined I would use these should the Demon Empire ever attack me here.”

She added a warning.

“To release these golems from their crystals will take a tremendous amount of mana. I had expected to use the power of the tree to free them, but... Well, with your mana reserves, it might just be possible.”

She also explained that the golems had a time limit. I took out my pocket watch and checked the time.

We need to finish this fast. I didn’t think I’d be able to give Erika back her secret weapons now.

Around half the golems were holding back monsters at the entrance to the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. The other half had crossed the citadel grounds with me, and now faced the battlefield. The mass of golems broke away little by little, charging off into battle.

At first the human soldiers attacked the golems like they were just any other monster.

Can’t blame them for confusing golems for enemy reinforcements.

The golems for their part didn’t respond or counterattack in any way, singularly focused on beating down every golden-eyed monster in sight. Eventually the humans realized they weren’t going to be targets of their attacks.

It’s slow, but they’re starting to work together.

“Right, then...” I looked out over the raging battlefield. “Pretty different from how I’d planned it, but I guess who cares, so long as we accomplish our goals.”

We’re here to help Princess Cattlea and rescue her if necessary.

“Squee!”

Piggymaru stretched a tentacle out over to a warhorse that had lost its rider. The little slime was still tired from linking with me as we

fought our way out of the forest, but had recovered just enough to lend a helping hand. Piggymaru gently brought the horse closer.

I called over to Seras, who was wearing her Fly Swordsman disguise as well. “Seras—you go and help the princess. Move solo for a while, and make your own calls while you’re out there.”

“Understood.” Seras’ voice was warped and distorted by the voice change crystal in her mask, just as mine was.

“Ah, Sir Too-ka...?”

“I’ll go out there and finish this battle, if I can,” I said, looking out at the battlefield. “Like Erika’s report said, there’s someone I might need to take care of first.”

“Then I will assist you with that before I leave,” said Seras.

“No. This’ll all have been for nothing if the princess dies in the meantime. Be a Holy Knight of Neah for the day, and go support your master the best you can.”

After a short pause, Seras answered through gritted teeth, “Understood.”

She leaped toward the warhorse, her black cloak fluttering behind her, and floated down softly into the saddle—her landing cushioned by the power of the spirits.

“I will support our master while you’re gone,” said Eve.

“I’m glad you are here with us. Please—protect Sir Too-ka.” Seras looked up at her from the horse’s back.

Eve nodded, in human form underneath her own fly knight disguise. “Don’t worry. Just go.”

Seras spurred her horse to a gallop, away from the war chariot and toward the standard of Neah. Eve watched her go for a moment before turning back to me.

“What should we do?”

A line of ogre soldiers was formed up across the battlefield, and I could see a ridiculously large palanquin in the middle of their ranks. There were two huge purple beasts standing tall on their hind legs in front of it. Their arms were folded, and they were studying us carefully.

“I’m going to kill those guys.”

“The essence they’re giving off, it’s so much stronger than the ogre soldiers and other monsters. Even I can tell that much,” said Eve.

“Looks like two of them are really dangerous. Probably those elite demons—the Inner Circle that Erika mentioned. They don’t look like humanoid types, at least.”

“All that pomp and spectacle... Are those the leaders of the Demon Empire’s army?” she asked.

“Most likely, yeah. And cutting off the head of a group’s the easiest way to make the whole thing crumble. The essence those Inner Circle guys are giving off apparently has a huge impact on the battlefield.”

Not just that. Those Inner Circle demons probably have a lot of EXP. They might’ve been intended by the Goddess as food to fuel the other heroes’ growth. My mouth curled into a smile under my mask. It would serve better as an offering to the Lord of the Flies.

“Hard to find a reason not to crush them right here, right now. That four-horned one over there looks like it’s fighting someone. They look a bit injured from the way they’re moving, but they’re holding their own.”

Wait—wait a minute. That girl the demon’s fighting... What’s with that huge sword of hers? How can she even wield that thing, it’s way too big for her. But it looks like she’s swinging it around just fine. She’s either incredibly strong, or that’s some kind of special weapon that barely weighs anything.

And wait... If she’s fighting an Inner Circle demon, then she must be a hero.

“Master, what’s wrong?” asked Eve.

“That’s...Sogou?”

Despite Eve coming across the Takao sisters in the forest, it was the first time I had actually seen another hero from 2-C since that foul Goddess tried to dispose of me.

“Erika didn’t say anything about who’d be here, except that Kiri-hara and Vicius were gone. Huh.”

So Sogou’s here, then. I should fight with her—try to help her. The only ones that might get in my way would be Oyamada, Yasu, Ikusaba, or any of Kiri-hara’s hangers-on. I can’t see any of them right now. Well, not

that they'd have any chance to get in my way in this situation anyway. If anyone tries something, I'll deal with it on the spot. I don't have space in my head to be thinking about every possibility and variable right now.

From what I could observe, Sogou was holding on in her fight against the Inner Circle demon.

Figures. She's an S-class hero after all.

"Let's take out the one on the throne first."

"Fine, but shouldn't we help whoever's fighting the four-horned one first?" asked Eve.

I gave her a half smile and snorted. "Nah—the moment we tried to help her with that one, the other would only come for us anyway."

The way that humanoid monster with all the limbs died just now, the one on the throne must've seen that too. Though I did partly put on that little show just to restore my MP.

"I've killed a humanoid type with some mysterious power, brought a huge army of golems to the fight, and I'm out here announcing I'll annihilate them all, y'know? Of course the strongest guy's gonna come try to kill me."

"You always intended to fight the enemy's generals then, didn't you?"

"I can slaughter monsters way stronger than me thanks to my status effect skills. It's the most effective way to use them."

"But do you mind if I ask... You said the name of Ashint just now. I thought you intended to have Ashint's disappearance remain permanent? Or at least that's how I heard it."

"Circumstances changed. With things as they are, we can hardly sneak in and support the princess in secret, pretending to be hired mercenaries. I need to use my status effect skills in front of this huge crowd of people."

That's why I decided to reveal my "true identity" to everyone.

"By using the Ashint name, I might be able to pass off my skills as that cursed-magic they were always bragging about."

That band of cursed-magic users disappeared suddenly. But everyone still thinks it was their strength that destroyed the Black Dragon Knights and the Strongest Man in the World—probably because Ashint ran around telling

that to anyone that would listen before they vanished.

“Hmph. That cursed-magic of theirs was just a special kind of poison, but it could be that we’re the only ones who know that now. This might work.”

“Vicius is going to realize I’m alive sooner or later, but there’s no harm in delaying that discovery a little longer. I want to try and hide it as long as I can. So, for now I’m going to try and pass off my status effect skills as cursed-magic.”

“Hmph... That explains your statement earlier.”

I poured mana into one of Erika’s handmade magical spears, and looked back over my shoulder. “All right. Looks like things are coming together.”

There was a horde of golems trailing behind the war chariot, heading straight for the ogre soldiers surrounding the enthroned demon. I looked down at Sleil, who was racing toward the enemy, her breathing ragged and heavy.

“Sorry, it’s just a little further, Sleil. We never could have done this without you.”

She brayed back at me, as if to say, *“Leave it to me!”*

Eve and the golems kept the swarming monsters off our war chariot as we shot straight toward the monster on its throne, never letting up for a second.

“Almost in range.”

“You’re really going to do this, Too-ka?”

“Assuming that my status effect skills work on that thing... But yeah.”

But I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. We heroes from another world are the ones who’re supposed to take down that source of all evil, aren’t we?

“If our skills didn’t work on those things, I’d start to question why they summoned us to this world in the first place. The real problem here is knowing just what it is we’re up against.”

I quickly gave orders to Eve, and disconnected Sleil from the war chariot. I then jumped onto her back and turned in time to see the chariot almost flip over behind me. Eve jumped away and landed neatly

on the ground nearby.

Eve and I are parting ways for now. These golems are coming with me though.

I spread my arms wide.

“Listen here, you servants of the Demon King!” I turned to the eight-horned demon before me, and strained my voice to speak as loud as I could. “I am the former leader of the cursed-magic users known as Ashint! We are reborn under a new name—the Lord of the Flies Brigade! Now tremble with fear before me, you filthy animals! Do you truly believe you can defeat the man who vanquished Civit Gartland, the Strongest Man in the World?!”

The monster took a step back—my clear voice seemed to have reached his ears.

“What?! Y-you worthless human...” I heard the monster’s words, but its voice wasn’t booming over the battlefield as it had been before.

Was it using something like my voice amplifying crystal to make its voice louder? Maybe that’s just something that all Inner Circle demons can do.

I arrogantly placed a hand on my mask and pointed squarely at Einglanz.

“I am of heroic blood! Descended from a hero who once destroyed the source of all evil! I have inherited the power to cast out monsters of your ilk! You Inner Circle are powerless to stand against my might! I killed that humanoid type with a single blow! Behold the strength of my cursed-magic!”

“You dare to taunt the great Einglanz?! I will not allow it! Get out of my way, you blasted ogres! Move!” Einglanz charged, the ground rumbling beneath him. The ogre soldiers split down the center, carving out a path in their ranks for him to pass through.

I spurred Sleil on faster at the moment that Einglanz began to sprint toward me. A huge spear came flying toward him, glowing with pale blue light—his golden eyes only just realized what was happening a moment before it struck, barely giving him time to swat it from the air.

“Wha?!”

Thrown by Eve, the magical spear had flown like a shot from a

railgun. But the missile broke into pieces, the light fading as it fell to the ground.

The spear was fast—but Einglanz had been faster.

“Arrogant fool!”

All his attention was focused on me. I provoked him, made him furious. He wasn't in a calm enough state of mind to pay any attention to what Eve was doing off in the distance.

Just then my upper body jerked down to the saddle, leaving me staring at the back of Sleis neck.

“Hmph.” Einglanz snorted at me. “Got you.”

I raised my head as much as I could manage. The Inner Circle demon stood before me. The anger was gone from his face—replaced by complete calm. He now bore the dignified expression of a strong warrior standing well out of range of my abilities. The great purple Inner Circle monster seemed to be waiting for something.

“Gah! M-my body?!”

“You are defeated, King of Ashint. You're now in range of my Demon King Essence.” He spread his arms wide.

I tried to pull my body back up to face him, but it was no use. It was like there was some terrible weight pressing down on me.

“You planned on making a grand declaration to distract me. You would use your insolent remarks to provoke me into a rage and have me lose my senses, then seize that opening to attack me with a spear. But I saw through all of your plans, right from the start.”

He swung his right arm around in a great arc.

“But that is not the extent of my intellect. It was my fine acting that made it appear I had lost control! Screaming and roaring, bursting my way through the crowd of ogres—that was all to give credence to the lie! I showed you an opening and drew you into the domain of my Demon King Essence!”

I felt the pressure inside my head—my consciousness blurred and began fading. Bile churned in my stomach and I started to gag.

“Gh, hhh—!”

Slei never stopped galloping toward the enemy, unaffected by the Demon King Essence. Einglanz's flexed his massive arms, and he roared

out at me.

“You may have the blood of some hero of old. You may even have defeated that Strongest Man in the World! But none born of this world will ever defeat me! You are all powerless before my essence! Now you shall taste true despair! I will save your corpse, cook it, and feed it piece by piece to the heroes I capture today!” His pulsing golden eyes narrowed sadistically. “You will forever rue the day you underestimated me!”

20 meters...in range.

“Paralyze.” I sat up and raised my arm. “Sorry, but—you’re the one who’ll do the ruining today.”

“Wh-what...? M-my arms. I can’t m-move...? No... I c-can’t m-move anything?!”

It worked—even against the Inner Circle of the Demon King’s army.

“Right, then.” I stuck out my arm toward him. “What was all that about Demon King Essence then?”

When I’d entered the range of his essence, I jerked forward on purpose. That’s what gave Einglanz confidence. He thought he’d already won. He thought if the essence worked on me, then there was no way I could be a hero. Thankfully Sleis kept rushing toward him and he bought my act.

Sleis stopped, and I sat up on her back.

“I-impossible! Y-you can move... E-even in my essence... What...?! No... It can’t b-be... Y-you’re a...?!”

“Yeah. Impossible as it might seem, I’m a hero.”

Hook, line, and sinker.

I had learned of how someone affected by demon essence might look beforehand from Seras and Erika.

“I... I-it’s not p-possible...! The great...!”

It’s lucky his voice isn’t being amplified right now, or he’d let the whole battlefield know that I’m a hero from another world... Even if I do have a plan for that in my back pocket.

I snorted, looking up at Einglanz standing paralyzed before me.

“When I charged straight toward you, mouthing off about how

great I am and bragging about all my achievements—you thought I was an idiot, didn't you?"

"Urk..."

"The character of the confident, unthinking idiot—it has such a surprising and interesting effect on people, you know? Especially on those who already think they're smarter than their enemies."

"Y-you impudent l-little...!"

"And hey—you said you were only acting when you got mad at my provocations, right? But your acting wasn't good enough to deceive even yourself. When I entered the range of your essence, you even told me, letting me know the range for sure."

"There was something strange about it—a change in the tone of your voice. It made me think. These monsters might be strong enough to be called the Inner Circle of the Demon King's army...but in terms of acting ability, I still have the upper hand."

The spear Eve threw wasn't a surprise attack—it was just to measure the enemy's reflexes and speed. With that one blow, I understood how fast Einglanz really was, and knew that I could pull this off. It was an attack that he only noticed at the last moment. There was no room for acting there.

"D-don't g-get c-cocky! J-just b-because y-you've—!"

"Berserk."

"Ghhuuaaah?!" Einglanz's eyes opened so wide, they looked like they might pop out. Blood spurted from newly opened wounds all over his body and he rocked to the side, threatening to fall.

I cackled menacingly.

My cursed magic can do more than just stop you from moving.

The monster somehow stayed on his feet.

"I'll... I'll kill you...!" He stared daggers at me, tears of blood streaming from his eyes. His whole body began to swell—those eight intimidating horns warped and cracked.

"Gha?!"

It suicide to try and force yourself out of my status effects. But the truly strong can't help but try. Civit Garland did, too. It's a hell of their own creation.

The ogre soldiers nearby were lost in confusion, unable to comprehend what was happening...just as the wave of golems began a relentless attack upon them.

Maybe the one who understands this situation the least is this Inner Circle demon right here.

“I-Inconceivab-ble...! This ridiculous ability... I... What are y-you?! I never expected to... Gah?! That meddlesome Goddess! To think she had a thing like you...hidden in reserve... Gah!”

Einglanz struggled, approaching death.

Unlike his speed, it seems like he has a whole lot of stamina. But except for Slow, all my abilities just cost 10 MP each. There’s almost no chance of running out of MP here. I can go as long as it takes.

Hell.

Endless suffering.

Once I’ve got you, there’s no escape.

“This is the end for you, Einglanz.”

“Aaagh! Ohh, eh...”

Eventually he gave out, sinking into a pool of his own blood. He never called out to his troops for help. Nor did he use his final breath to speak to his subordinates. He was swallowed up by a great whirlpool of confusion and incomprehension, and died inside of it. I received a convenient pop-up to confirm that the monster was really dead.

Level up!

Lv. 2112 -> Lv. 2500

Against enemies that I expect will level me up, this is a good way to tell if they’re really dead or not.

“Do it, Sleii.”

She neighed twice in her own unique way—a signal to Eve that the Inner Circle demon was dead. After Sleii’s signal, I took the voice amplifying crystal out of my pouch, and fitted it back into my mask to give a signal of my own with a click.

“This is it, Einglanz. You’re finished!” I shouted.

You've been finished for a few moments now, but how's that other Inner Circle demon going to react at the announcement that its ally is on death's door? Ignore it? Call for an immediate retreat? Panic? Or maybe...

"Impossible! Lord Einglanz can't possibly be defeated! Lord Einglanz is capable of birthing ogre soldiers! I cannot let this happen!" screamed the four-horned demon as he came rushing toward me.

So he's made his choice to rescue his ally.

A number of unlucky soldiers found themselves in the demon's path.

"Gah! Ahh?!" They fell flailing to the ground as soon as they were in range of the essence's effect, most fainting.

Easy to tell the range of an Inner Circle demon's essence when they're moving across a battlefield. He looks to have just a little shorter range than Einglanz's did.

I took the voice amplifying crystal out of my mask, and turned Sleil in the direction of the advancing monster. It was still closing the distance between us, kicking golems to the ground as it came.

I managed to pull it off Sogou at least. That is, if she was still holding her own against it.

There was nothing about the Inner Circle demon that told me if she'd wounded it. From a distance it appeared to still have its defenses intact.

"This S-class hero shouldn't even be here on this battlefield! The Demon King instructed me that so long as I, Zweigseed, could hold the heroes' attention, we could win this battle without incident! This was to be a perfect harvest!" he cried.

Well, I'm not an S-class hero. He's right about that, at least. Guess I should try the same trick I used on Einglanz.

I was readying myself for a second performance when the Inner Circle demon was split clean in two.

The monster's upper body hung in the air, separated from its legs almost as if it were floating. Its purple-furred torso had been brutally sliced in half, with a single silver flash of a huge sword.

From behind the monster's back, Sogou Ayaka jumped forward, sword in hand. With incredible speed, she swung down on the monster

vertically once more.

“To think you’d allow me such an opportunity in a one-on-one battle...” With a flash, she drew a cross on the Inner Circle demon’s body and split it into four parts. “Careless.”

“Gh-oooh...?!”

Out of some final survival reflex, the monster desperately tried to hold the two halves of its split skull together, but it was no use. She didn’t even permit the monster to let out its final death cries. Sogou Ayaka dissected the monster with such speed, even if it had regenerative abilities, they would have been unable to keep up. The wild strokes of her sword diced the creature into countless pieces, reducing Zweigseed into lumps of flesh scattered with tufts of purple fur.

At last, his remains lay strewn across the battlefield.

She’s so fast. So this is what a trained S-class hero looks like.

Ayaka looked down at the lumps of flesh that had once been the Inner Circle demon. She was panting, her shoulders heaving up and down—the armor that had covered them was torn off completely.

The bleeding has already stopped though. Must be thanks to her stat modifiers. She looks different somehow. Like she’s been pushing herself too hard, forcing her body to its limits.

Sogou turned her attention to me, still panting.

I bent forward a little, holding my side as I rode Slei at a walk from the battlefield.

“Nice to meet you,” I said as she approached. My voice was warped by the voice change crystal—there was no chance she would recognize me. Sogou’s huge silver sword had transformed down to a more appropriate size.

“Thanks you for your help,” she said. Her breathing was still rough, and she still looked ready for a fight.

“Worry not...this black horse is an ally of mine. It’s perfectly tame.”

I spoke politely and tried to sound as tired as possible.

This is the way the leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade should talk—in much the same way Muaji had.

“Are you okay?” she asked, relaxing her stance a little.

“I’m fine. I suffered under the influence of that Inner Circle demon’s essence. It was a close fought battle indeed. I never imagined the essence’s effect would be so powerful... Gh?!” I cried out, acting as if I was in pain. Sogou made to come forward, fearing I’d fall from my horse, but I stopped her with a wave of my hand. “Had my cursed-magic not been effective, I would surely have fallen. Should the fight have dragged on longer under the fog of that essence, then...I would not have lived this day.”

“When you appeared, I saw the Inner Circle monsters focus their attention on you, and that is what allowed me to keep fighting, I believe. Thank you. And, regarding Ashint, those who defeated the Black Dragon Knights, I wished to ask—”

“Don’t you have something more pressing to attend to?” I interrupted, shifting a little on Sleis back, and looking toward Sogou’s allies who were still out there fighting. “From the way you were moving around as you fought that Inner Circle demon, I suppose you aren’t affected by the essence. You’re a hero from another world then, aren’t you? A strong one, too... Aren’t there people still fighting out there who could use your help?”

Sogou gave a start, and turned to see her allies still fighting the ogre soldiers out in the field. She wiped the sweat from her brow and turned her back to me.

“Allow me to thank you again once this is over. First, I have to save my classmates.”

She looked around until she found a warhorse wandering the battlefield, and took off toward it. Several ogre soldiers noticed her coming, and leaped at her. She killed them instantly, and mounted the horse, transforming her weapon into a silver spear as she sped off into battle.

Good rider, too... Way better than me. Should’ve expected as much of Sogou Ayaka, I guess. Class rep to the core, isn’t she?

When Mimori Touka was sent to the Ruins of Disposal, she was the only one who tried to intervene. She defied that foul Goddess. Her appearance might have changed, but she’s still the same person under there. The way she cares for other people hasn’t changed one bit.

I watched her disappear into the distance, sweeping her way

through the raging storm of ogre soldiers.

“Yeah... See you around,” I said, once I knew she was out of earshot.

The tide was turning, thanks not only to the golems, but to the death of the two Inner Circle demons as well.

They probably never even dreamed this would happen.

As the Demon King’s army began to crumble, the humans only banded together ever more tightly to press their advantage. I gave orders to Slei to turn back into her second stage of transformation, to make her look more like a regular horse.

I don’t want the other soldiers to mistake her for a monster and attack her. And that third stage takes a toll on her, too. I should let her rest whenever I can.

“Did you do it, my master?” asked Eve, rushing over to me. She was drenched from head to toe in ogre blood, and it dripped from the sword in her hand.

“Yeah, managed to finish off the mean looking Inner Circle guys somehow.”

Eve looked out over the battlefield.

“It looks like they’re taking care of the horde.”

Not as many monsters were arriving from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters as expected. Most had been smashed to a pulp by Erika’s golems before they even made it to the citadel. Around half of the golems’ total number now roamed the battlefield, creating havoc in the ogre formations. The two Inner Circle demons and their Demon King Essence had been compensating for the enemy force being outnumbered, but now both were dead and the Demon King’s armies were losing. The human forces from all nations were banding together stronger than ever, and looked as if they might not leave a single ogre soldier alive. The momentum was especially strong near the Neahan standard—they clearly had high morale, and were well commanded.

Looks like the princess is still alive too—She and Seras are doing well over there.

“We made it in time.” I looked away, back to the south. “We don’t

have too much longer now. The enemy might try to meet up with the monsters my golems are holding back from the forest.”

I checked my watch—the golems didn’t have much longer left in them. Then I dismounted Sleil and pulled the shortsword from my belt. “Guess we should thin out the number of ogre soldiers around here before those golden-eyes arrive.”

Once the Demon King’s army is destroyed, we can focus entirely on the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters, and avoid getting caught in a trap.

Some of the ogre soldiers were starting to run, but many kept fighting. They still desperately assaulted the human lines as if their lives depended on it.

Thinking about future battles, trying to take down as many humans with them as they can, eh?

A single ogre charged for me, a spear in his hand. I jumped in close and slit the monster’s throat, then kicked its lifeless body to the ground and prepared for the next. Eve sliced through several more then jumped over to me, watching my back.

“My master’s gotten skilled at close combat.”

“Only thanks to your training. Hardly compares to what you guys can do.”

Eve’s fighting style is so refined—she can kill three monsters in the time it takes me to finish off one. She’s using the enemy’s weapons against them too. It’s more of a slaughter than a fight when she does it.

I froze multiple targets with my Paralyze skill, and set about slitting their throats one by one. I scanned the battlefield once more, assessing the situation.

From here on out, I should probably stick to moving in the shadows.

Around the same time the ogre soldiers ceased to really function as an army, the golden-eyed monsters came rushing from the north gate. The golems were gone now, having run out of time after all the destruction they had dealt to the monsters around them. Their forms faded, and they crumbled into dust that was carried away by the wind.

The human side’s forces were already back on their feet, though, and were formed up and waiting.

Baron Pollary from Alion, The Princess Cattlea of Neah, a young Bakossi dragon knight by the name of Gus... And of course the heroes from another world, led by Sogou Ayaka. Their forces fought as one as they clashed with the remaining monsters. The Inner Circle demons with their fearsome Demon King Essence were gone, and there were no stragglers left to worry about.

As for my Lord of the Flies Brigade...my main priority right now is hiding my identity.

Eve and I ran to assist the army of Neah, trying our best not to stand out. I used as few status effect skills as possible, and the mask was able to cut down some of the noise as I called out my skill names.

There's always the danger that someone from 2-C will overhear. They all saw and heard me try to use PaLyze on Vicius after all.

"Gyaah!"

I knocked a monster's legs out from under it and shoved a sword into its eye.

"This is exactly why I spent all that time doing combat training."

It's nothing like fighting with my skills. The feel of my sword making contact with flesh.

Wait—besides Sogou, where are the other elite heroes? I heard that Kirihara wasn't here, but...

I looked over to where the 2-C heroes had formed up.

The Takao sisters, Ikusaba Asagi, Oyamada, and Yasu aren't there either. Did they go with another army? From the way that Zweigseed guy was talking, it sounded like there was only one S-class here.

I pulled the blade from the monster's eye and looked to see Seras fighting near the Princess of Neah.

She's using her spirit armor. So I guess that cat's out of the bag, huh.

The knights were all rapidly responding to her orders.

So that explains their high morale as well, then. They must've gotten news that the former Captain of the Band of Holy Knights is back. I guess I did give her free rein to fight however she wanted. I never forbade her from using her spirit armor.

"Figures."

Nothing to be done about that now. I could hardly ask her to hold back any of her strength when the life of someone she cares about is on the line.

And so, despite heavy losses, the White Citadel of Protection was defended from the surprise attack, and the two Inner Circle demon leaders were defeated. The human armies were able to force a retreat by the monsters rushing in from the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters to the south.

Epilogue

SERAS ASHRAIN DISPELLED her spirit armor, and returned her blade to its scabbard. The whole area was littered with dead monsters, and the real fighting was over. The majority of the monsters that had arrived from the south were now silent corpses and the ogre soldiers of the Demon King's army were practically all gone. The Sacred Alliance had won.

Seras surveyed her surroundings as the sun began to set and the stink of blood drifted toward her on the breeze. She was surrounded by the faces of holy knights she once knew, all of them bright and happy, even the wounded. The official story was that Seras had abandoned her country and run, but her fellow knights had the utmost affection for her in that moment.

Seras felt a great sorrow for what had happened, and a strong sense of gratitude to those who had once served under her. The knights parted, and a woman dressed in the finest military garb rode through the path they opened.

"Seras," Cattlea Straumss called to her fondly.

"Princess."

"I was surprised to see that chariot appear, but even more so when it turned out it was you who came to our rescue."

Seras scratched at her cheek with an index finger, feeling a little embarrassed.

"I was surprised too. I never expected you to realize it was me before I even equipped my spirit armor..."

It had all happened in a matter of seconds. Seras arrived just as the mounted army of Neah collided with the ogre soldiers' formation. She rushed immediately to Cattlea's side.

"Allow me to assist you!" she'd called out, her voice distorted by the voice change crystal in her mask. She cut down several ogre soldiers with one swing, not waiting for an answer.

“Seras?” responded Cattlea in shock.

Seras was unable to hide her astonishment either.

I’m hidden under the mask of the Fly Swordsman, disguising my appearance and voice...

But Cattlea knew her true identity at once. Seras was unable to suppress her emotions, to keep them from spilling out, even under her mask. She had planned to attempt to blend in, but she felt so strangely happy to be recognized. She gave up trying.

Ah. It’s so hard to keep secrets from others.

“I apologize for my lateness,” she said with renewed determination. They were surrounded by ogre soldiers on all sides, in the heat of fierce battle.

Some of those ogres might have noticed Cattlea’s presence here.

Seras didn’t hesitate. She activated her spirit armor immediately, knowing exactly what that meant. The holy knights she had fought alongside for so long would recognize her now for who she was. Despite the risks, she wanted to protect Cattlea. She had to, no matter what.

As the sun set over the ravaged battlefield piled high with corpses, Seras looked for Too-ka, but found he was nowhere to be seen.

He never told me not to use my spirit armor, nor to hide my true identity at all costs. He left the decision completely to me. If he was going to forbid me from revealing my identity, he would’ve said so.

Seras chuckled.

But he didn’t... That’s just like him. He probably thought it best to keep my survival a secret, then if possible reveal it only to Cattlea herself at a later stage.

“So you’ve been well, it seems,” said Cattlea.

“Yes, I have. Thanks to a certain someone.”

Cattlea turned to see Too-ka appearing from the dust, riding the war chariot.

“Thanks to the Lord of the Flies, I take it. You’re traveling together?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting character, that one...intriguing indeed.” Cattlea dismounted her horse in well-practiced motions, and walked over to stand before Seras. “Well, first of all, I rejoice to see you alive and well.”

She smiled, and held out her white gloved hand, still splattered with blood.

Seras looked up at her. The princess’ face was illuminated by the orange glow of the setting sun.

I did it. I protected her.

The reality hit her all at once, welling up inside her. Somewhere deep down, she had been dreaming of meeting her again. But now she was here, right before her, today—this Cattlea was real.

I did it.

Seras took a moment, trying to find the words.

“Yes, princess,” she replied, with tears in her eyes. “I’m so glad you’re safe as well.”

MIMORI TOUKA

NIGHT CREPT OVER the battlefield after the sun had set, a black wave slowly hiding the corpses from view like a dark tide coming in. Eve checked whether one of the ogres nearby was really dead, then stood up.

“Looks like we won,” she said.

“Yeah.” I sat on a boulder, resting my arm on one knee and surveying the area. Sleil was taking a break somewhere nearby, and Eve was facing the southern wall.

“That Ayaka Sogou hero was really something. Her unique skill of course, but also the way she handled herself in battle, far above any of the others,” she said.

“...Yeah.” *Sogou Ayaka’s gotten stronger.*

Eve said nothing more.

Maybe she’s worried that if someone happened to overhear us talking

about her, it'd give away our connection.

She sat down next to me. "We managed to complete our mission, too."

"Saved the princess. Things are looking up. Thanks for all your help."



“Heh heh, save your thanks. We’re friends, right?”

Eve Speed really is a good person. She learned such cruel truths about the world, in such dark places—but she’s relentlessly good, right to the core.

“All the more reason to thank you.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.” Then remembering the promise I had made to myself, I stood. “Let’s go.”

“Hmph?”

Eve turned back, to see a group of soldiers who were done fighting had started to gather.

Probably came to see the Lord of the Flies Brigade. It’ll be harder to talk to Eve with them nearby, though.

“Let’s go, Astorva,” I said, using Eve’s pseudonym as we walked toward the soldiers.

“Hmph.”

She nodded, and followed. Slei stood too, and trotted after us. The soldiers looked a little nervous as we approached.

“What can I do for you?” I asked gently, standing before them.

The soldier in front gestured to himself, as if unsure if I was talking to him. “Ah, no it’s... Well...”

My black robes and Lord of the Flies mask were by now stained wine red.

I suppose I did barge into the battle, declare myself the former Ashint leader, and go around killing humanoid types and Inner Circle demons with my cursed magic. I can’t blame these soldiers for being intimidated.

“I am Belzegea, Captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade. Worry not, we came here to aid you in battle. Hopefully, that much is evident from our fight with the monsters that came from the south,” I said lightly, before bowing once and continuing on my way. The soldiers parted to let us pass.

My polite and detailed responses must have calmed their nerves. As I looked back, I saw them chatting among themselves, but there was no sign they would attempt to pursue us.

“This battle’s going to make the Lord of the Flies Brigade famous

overnight,” said Eve, looking back at the soldiers.

“Yeah, no doubt about that.”

The only problem is with what comes next. How is Vicius going to respond to all this?

Seras Ashrain is still alive.

The Inner Circle demons have been defeated by cursed-magic.

That foul Goddess can't afford to ignore any of this news.

“Moving forward, I'll be making use of the Lord of the Flies Brigade and my true identity separately.”

If the brigade is something that Vicius can't ignore, that makes it a useful tool.

“If all goes well, I might even be able to use it throw her off my scent. But no matter what, I'm done putting off my goal.”

I passed through the flickering torches of the battlefield, my black horse and warrior at my side. The dark night swallowed the sunset glow whole, and I was once more cloaked in the comforting embrace of that deep, black darkness.

“All that's left is to push on to our journey's end.”

Afterword

FOR HEALTH REASONS I've recently been eating liver a bit more regularly—this is Shinozaki Kaoru.

In this fifth volume, we've finally seen one big reunion, which made writing this book a little more unique than usual (for that and other reasons, the page count is a little higher than past volumes).

Reunions are strange things, especially interesting when it's someone you haven't seen for a very long time.

The picture I have of the person in my head is frozen at the point at which I saw them last, and it's like that mental picture has to be refreshed the moment we meet again. Sometimes the person hasn't changed all that much, but sometimes the difference in appearance and my impression of someone completely flips after seeing them again. Of course, we'll both exchange information and catch up about recent developments, but personally, I think I like that unique feeling you get at the "moment of reunion" the best of all.

How did the characters feel in that moment when they reunited in this volume, I wonder?

An eternal question that has been on my mind when writing has been what the ratio should be between things that push the tempo of the story forward and everyday life kind of scenes. I personally like battle manga that have everyday scenes sprinkled in and I feel I've done that in several places in this story. I think this is the key with battle manga, that the more central the fighting is to the story, the more the everyday scenes will stand out against them. It makes me appreciate the latter all the more.

But while it's fun to discover another side of your characters in everyday life, it can also slow down the pace of the main story if there are too many scenes like those. These kinds of things worry me, but I really do want more everyday life scenes, to drill into the characters more and bring out their charm. With that in mind, I've written up a few drafts of things for the future (showing more from Seras' perspective as well, of course). In any case, everyday stuff is always a

good thing.

Acknowledgments—thank you again so, so much to my editor O-sama, and apologies as always for all of the trouble. I'd like to really give it a little more horsepower this year. Or so I'm hoping.

Thank you to KWKM-sama once again for all the ever-improving illustrations. I can feel the appeal of Seras as a heroine just exploding off the page with every scene her illustrations appear in. Not to mention that the dark hero-style Lord of the Flies costume and matching Fly Swordsman are so cool to see. Thank you so much.

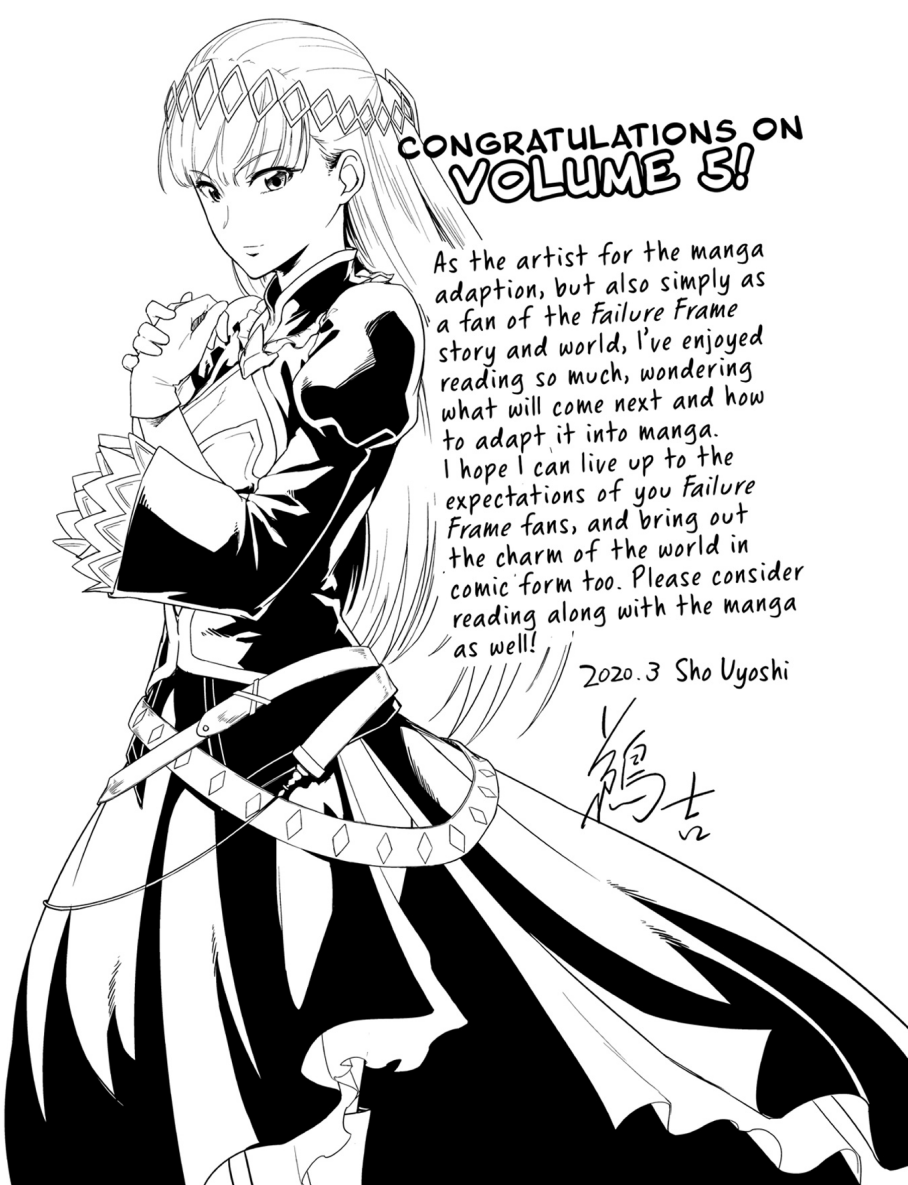
Thank you also to everybody who has helped this book make it to print.

Thank you to the readers of the web version for all your support. I would greatly appreciate it if you could help Failure Frame continue into the future.

Thanks finally to you, for picking up this volume and reading it. In the first volume, I wrote that I hoped that reading this book could be a happy experience for you all—it would bring me joy to know that you have continued to enjoy these books as well.

I hope we meet in the next stage of the story, the foreboding next volume to come.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



CONGRATULATIONS ON VOLUME 3!

As the artist for the manga adaption, but also simply as a fan of the *Failure Frame* story and world, I've enjoyed reading so much, wondering what will come next and how to adapt it into manga. I hope I can live up to the expectations of you *Failure Frame* fans, and bring out the charm of the world in comic form too. Please consider reading along with the manga as well!

2020.3 Sho Uyoshi

Uyoshi



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